

NĀGĀRJUNA AND THE RATNĀVALĪ:
NEW WAYS TO DATE AN OLD PHILOSOPHER*

JOSEPH WALSER

There have been two prevailing trends among scholars of Buddhism writing about Nāgārjuna. The first is to simply assume that Nāgārjuna lived sometime around the second century AD. The second trend, dating to the beginning of the twentieth century, is found among scholars who try to provide a firm scholarly grounding for this assumption. These scholars have been discouraged in their efforts to come up with anything definitive concerning Nāgārjuna's date or place of activity. Among the more prominent of the early studies we have statements such as the following from Max Walleser's 1923 study:

The systematic development of the thought of voidness laid down in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* is brought into junction with the name of a man of whom we cannot even positively say that he has really existed, still less that he is the author of the works ascribed to him: this name is Nāgārjuna¹.

Almost eighty years later, the situation has not improved. Surprisingly little in the way of new evidence or new interpretation has been brought to bear on the question of his dates and location in recent scholarship, although there have been a number of works summarizing the available data. The most recent of these summaries, "The Problem of the Historical Nāgārjuna Revisited," by Ian Mabbett provides an excellent survey and analysis of much available scholarship to date. The abstract to his article minces no words in its evaluation of the current state of Nāgārjuna scholarship.

* My sincere thanks to James Egge, Ikumi Kaminishi, and Gary Leupp who read drafts of this article, and to my wife Radha, who has read and commented on multiple versions.

¹ M. Walleser, *The Life of Nāgārjuna from Tibetan and Chinese Sources*, reprint (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1979), 1. The original article appeared in *Asia Major*, Introductory Volume. Hirth Anniversary Volume. (Leipzig: 1923), 421-55.

Nāgārjuna, the founder of Madhyamaka, is an enigma. Scholars are unable to agree on a date for him (within the first three centuries AD), or a place (almost anywhere in India), or even the number of Nāgārjuna's (from one to four). This article suggests that none of the commonly advanced arguments about his date or habitat can be proved; that later Nāgārjunas are more likely to have been (in some sense) the authors of pseudepigrapha than real individuals; that the most attractive (though unproved) reading of the evidence sets Nāgārjuna in the general area of Andhra country in about the third century AD².

The rather intractable problem with which scholars have been struggling becomes apparent in Mabbett's account of the sources. Although there is no lack of literary sources discussing Nāgārjuna, almost all of the elements contained therein are mythical at best and conflicting at worst. Further, very few details contained in these sources can be corroborated with external evidence. Most of this material comes from accounts that were written with hagiographical interests ahead of historical documentation. Clearly, for those who like certainty, any kind of "proof" of Nāgārjuna's dates and place of residence is a long way off.

Thus far, the details of Nāgārjuna's life have been little more than a passing curiosity to most Mādhyamika scholars — a problem which persists but which is assumed to have little bearing on his philosophy (which is the primary object of their interest). This is naive. Any philosophical text needs to be read within its socio-historical context. More to the point, Nāgārjuna's philosophy as presented in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (hereafter the "*Kārikā*") is argumentative, and the opponent or opponents are unnamed. The range of interpretations that one may give to any of the arguments in the *Kārikā* is limited, at least in part, by the assumptions that one makes about whom Nāgārjuna is arguing against.

The issue of the identity of Nāgārjuna's audience has not become an issue in Nāgārjuna scholarship because scholars have tended to read him through the lens of Candrakīrti or Bhāvaviveka, both of whom assume that Nāgārjuna's primary opponent is a Sarvāstivādin³. There is, however,

² I. Mabbett, "The Problem of the Historical Nāgārjuna Revisited," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 332.

³ See, for example, Candrakīrti's long explanation of the Buddhist path in his commentary on MMK. 24.4, which seems to come straight out of the 6th chapter of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*.

some reason to question this assumption. Richard Hayes⁴ has argued that Nāgārjuna's arguments against the *svabhāva* theory of the Sarvāstivādins do not refute any theory that the Sarvāstivādins actually held⁵. More to the point, Sarvāstivāda was not just a philosophical school in the abstract, but something that existed as an institutional reality at a specific times and places. In the first two centuries of the first millennium, it was centered in Gandhāra and Kashmir, and there is no reason at present to assume that its influence was pan-Indian.

Thus, when scholars interpret Mādhyamika philosophy as a response to Sarvāstivādin tenets they inadvertently import one of three assumptions about Nāgārjuna's date and place of residence — assumptions which they are unprepared to defend. If Nāgārjuna's opponent in the *Kārikā* was a Sarvāstivādin, then

- a) Nāgārjuna lived when and where the Sarvāstivādins were present; i.e. he lived somewhere in north India and his arguments were directed at a local opponent, or
- b) Nāgārjuna lived at a time and place where there were no Sarvāstivādins present and Sarvāstivādin philosophy was unheard of, or
- c) Nāgārjuna lived someplace where Sarvāstivādins were not present, but which had some kind of cultural contact with northwest India/Pakistan.

If the first option is assumed, then it implies an unstated presumption for which no evidence has been given. If the second assumption is true, then we might well question whether Nāgārjuna was actually addressing Sarvāstivādin claims at all. Finally, if the third assumption is correct, and the influence of Sarvāstivādin philosophy (as opposed to Sarvāstivāda monasteries) extended far beyond the regions occupied by Sarvāstivādin monasteries, this thesis too would have to be established with some evidence. None of these assumptions have been argued.

Any interpretation of Nāgārjuna's philosophy that involves contextualizing his arguments in larger discourses, either Brahmanical or Buddhist, involves similar unwitting assumptions about the date and location of the discourse. Philosophical propositions may claim to be universal, but

⁴ R. Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22 (1994): 311.

⁵ See, P. Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8 (1980): 1-45.

dialectics are always local. Scholars of Nāgārjuna do tend to ignore this factor in Nāgārjuna's philosophy, yet all but the most formal treatments of Nāgārjuna's logic have to assume something about his audience.

Mabbett's conclusions, however, need not be the end of the story. It is the purpose of this paper to argue that if we are willing to accept a fallibilist proof, or an analysis based on partial information, we can come to some kind of solution, albeit a tentative one. Given the pressing need to take some sort of stand on this issue, even a tentative solution is preferable to the present impasse.

In the following, I will identify two propositions that have a bearing on the date of Nāgārjuna. If both propositions turn out to be true, then we will have placed one event in Nāgārjuna's life, his writing of the *Ratnāvalī*, within a thirty year period at the end of the second century in the Andhra region around Dhanyakataka (modern Amaravati). My interpretation not only supports Mabbett's "most attractive reading" of third-century Andhra, but will upgrade it to "the most likely reading, given our current state of knowledge."

Let me begin by proposing the two sub-theses that could considerably narrow the range of dates and locations for Nāgārjuna. The first sub-thesis is that Nāgārjuna, the author of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, was also the author of the *Ratnāvalī*. The second sub-thesis is that a Sātavāhana king was Nāgārjuna's patron. Many scholars take both of these propositions for granted, but for our purposes it will be important to review the evidence. By means of these two sub-theses, I will establish a period and a location in which the *Ratnāvalī* could have been written, thereby establishing a benchmark event in the life of Nāgārjuna.

1. *The author of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā was also the author of the Ratnāvalī.*

Modern scholarship has a problem dating Nāgārjuna. The blame for this lies at least partly in the way that modern scholars have set up the problem. The first of Nāgārjuna's texts to be discovered, and the one which has attracted the most interest in the West has been the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. The name, Nāgārjuna is then treated as a synecdoche for "the author of the *Kārikā*," and hence it seems strange for us to ask

whether Nāgārjuna wrote the *Kārikā* because he is, by definition, its author. It only needs to be mentioned in passing that the West was not the first culture to make these kinds of assumptions, it is merely the first to use this one text as the sole indication of Nāgārjunian authenticity. For example, to Yijing, Nāgārjuna was first and foremost the author of the *Suḥṛllekha*, while for Pure Land Buddhists such as Shinran, Nāgārjuna was assumed to be the author of the *Twelve-Gate Treatise*.

Be that as it may, by identifying Nāgārjuna as the author of the *Kārikā*, modern scholars have painted themselves into something of a corner when it comes to the vexed issue of his date. They need to ground their arguments in his text (because the Nāgārjuna they are most interested in is, first and foremost, an author), and yet the only evidence which the *Kārikā* offers up is of a logical/doctrinal nature. A.K. Warder⁶ and David S. Ruegg⁷ have done an admirable job in constructing a “relative chronology” of Nāgārjuna *vis-a-vis* the development of Buddhist and Naiyāyika doctrine, but as the other authors they compare him with have even less secure dates than Nāgārjuna, we are left little better off than we started. For better or worse, in India “absolute chronologies” (i.e., a set of dates that can be translated into Gregorian dates), have only been worked out for empires and their political administrators. In order to connect Nāgārjuna to a Gregorian year, we must first connect him to an Indian monarch for whom the dates are known. To make this kind of connection we need to find evidence relating to practices or events that leave their mark in the archeological record. Unfortunately, the *Kārikā* is a peculiar text in that it focuses so exclusively on classical Buddhist doctrine and logical issues that it has few cultural references that would help us date it⁸.

The only option left to us is to seek evidence in other texts ascribed to Nāgārjuna, and this is where our scholarly presuppositions leave us in a

⁶ A.K. Warder, “Pārśva, Vasumitra (II), Caraka and Mātrceta” in *Papers on the date of Kaniska*, A. L. Basham, ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 331-5.

⁷ See D.S. Ruegg, *Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India*. A History of Indian Literature. Vol. 7, fasc. 1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981).

⁸ The only such reference that I have been able to find occurs in chapter 17 verse 14 where Nāgārjuna refers to a contract of debt (*ṛṇapattra*). While this is an interesting reference, it is hardly of any help in dating the work, as this practice is well attested in Kauṭilya’s *Ārthaśāstra* and other Dharmaśāstras as well as in inscriptions dating from the early centuries of the common era.

bind. While nobody wants to defend the thesis that Nāgārjuna only wrote one work, scholars are left in the uncomfortable position of having recourse to only two criteria by which to determine the authenticity of a putative Nāgārjunian text: a) the testimony of other (preferably early) authors, and b) similarities of logic, doctrine, style to the *Kārikā*. While these criteria have been effectively employed to *eliminate* texts as authentic Nāgārjuna texts, the same criteria are not so conclusive when it comes to establishing a text as authentic. Testimony of other authors, doctrine, logic, and style are, however, the only data we have, and so we must consider the evidence such as it is and make an educated guess as to where the weight of the evidence lies.

The criteria of doctrine, logic, and style have proven the most problematic to use. In order to date Nāgārjuna, we need specific cultural information, and yet most of the texts that present that kind of information are not concerned with the same doctrine as the *Kārikā*, and hence do not display its logic or style. An example of such a text is the *Suḥr̥llekha*, which though universally ascribed to Nāgārjuna, displays little of the interests and penchant for argument of the *Kārikā*. There is, however, one text ascribed to Nāgārjuna, which contains some sections with logical/doctrinal arguments similar to the *Kārikā* and has other sections with significant cultural content. This is a work called *The Ratnāvalī* or “The Jeweled Garland.” Because this work contains logical/doctrinal arguments similar to those in the *Kārikā*, its ascription to Nāgārjuna can be investigated using the criteria stated above. Once Nāgārjuna’s authorship of this work has been established, its numerous social and cultural references can be used to explore the date and location of its author.

1.1. The Authenticity of the *Ratnāvalī*

Nāgārjuna’s authorship of the *Ratnāvalī* has been well attested in India, China and Tibet going back at least as far back as the sixth century⁹. Paramārtha first translated the work into Chinese in the sixth century,

⁹ Christian Lindtner states that the *Ratnāvalī* is ascribed to Nāgārjuna by Bhavya, Candrakīrti, and Śāntarakṣita, “and many other later authors.” See, C. Lindtner, *Nāgārjuniana, Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, reprint 1990), 163.

although he does not name its author. The earliest explicit attribution of this text to Nāgārjuna can be found in Bhāvaviveka's *Tarkajvālā*, where he quotes verses thirty-five to thirty nine from the fifth chapter of the *Ratnāvalī*, introducing them with the words, "the great teacher, Ārya Nāgārjuna said...."¹⁰ Though the dates for Bhāvaviveka are even more elusive than are those of Nāgārjuna, it seems safe to place him in the sixth century¹¹ — perhaps as a slightly younger contemporary of Paramārtha. Candrakīrti (seventh century) quotes the *Ratnāvalī* a total of sixteen times in his *Prasannapadā*¹² and five times in his *Madhyamakāvātāra*. Though he never explicitly ascribes it to Nāgārjuna in these works, La Vallée Poussin notes that the *Ratnāvalī* verse quoted after verse three of the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Kārikā* "...est citée *Nāmasaṃgīṭīkā*, ad 96, où la *Ratnāvalī* est attribuée à Nāgārjuna."¹³ Similarly, both Haribhadra, in his 8th century *Prajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstra*, and Prajñākaramati (ca. end of eighth beginning of ninth centuries) in his *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* quote from it, but without attribution¹⁴. It is clear from the number and the context of these quotations that the *Ratnāvalī* was a text held in great esteem by the Mādhyamika School. It is not clear what conclusions, if any should be drawn from the fact that so many early scholars felt comfortable quoting it without attribution. Surely Candrakīrti knew about Bhāvaviveka's attribution of the text to Nāgārjuna, and if he doesn't repeat the former's attribution, neither does he deny it. In the eighth-century, Jñānagarbha and Klu'i rgyal mtshan as well as the team of Vidyākaraṇaprabha and [s]Ka ba dPal brtsegs both explicitly attribute the text to Nāgārjuna in their colophons, as does Ajītamitra, who wrote the ninth century *ṭīkā* on the work. In short, the work is attributed to

¹⁰ "slob dpon chen po 'phags pa na ga rdsu nas ji skad du." Peking Tripitaka, v. 96, #5256, 145a.

¹¹ For a discussion of his date, see S. Iida, *Reason and Emptiness: A Study in Logic and Mysticism* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1980), 6-12.

¹² For page numbers see M. Hahn, *Nāgārjuna's Ratnāvalī* (Bonn: Indica und Tibetica Verlag, 1982), 10.

¹³ L. de La Vallée Poussin, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās (Mādhyamikasūtras) de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā commentaire de Candrakīrti*, Bibliotheca Buddhica IV (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1970), 524, n. 4

¹⁴ Haribhadra cites *Ratnāvalī* vs. 98 in his *Abhisamayālaṃkāraloka* (p. 66 in Wogihara's edition)

Nāgārjuna as early as the sixth century and this attribution is repeated in the eighth and ninth centuries. While these attributions might seem late, it should be kept in mind that (other than a brief remark by Kumārajīva) Bhāvaviveka is the earliest source we have that mentions other texts that Nāgārjuna wrote.

1.2. Doctrine and logic in the *Ratnāvalī*

The doctrinal and logical content of the *Ratnāvalī* compares favorably with that of the *Kārikā*. The *Ratnāvalī* is a very different text than the *Kārikā*, and presumably speaks to a different audience. Nevertheless, it does contain a number of points of striking similarity to the *Kārikā*. In general, both works are committed to a Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness. There is also a similarity in the topics dealt with in both works as well as the way these topics are treated. For instance, both works have lengthy refutations of the three times (past present and future)¹⁵ as well as arguments about antecedent states of being¹⁶. The rather peculiar treatment of Nirvāṇa as being neither “*bhāva*” nor “*abhāva*” occurs in both works¹⁷ as does the teaching that saṃsāra is somehow not different than nirvāṇa¹⁸.

The topics discussed, however, do not help us to determine authorship since a rehearsal of topics is precisely what determines a school of thought. To determine authorship, we need to isolate those elements that are likely to be idiosyncratic by determining those elements which were unlikely to have been emulated by his followers. In the following, I identify three areas of Nāgārjuna’s writing in the *Kārikā* that appear to be matters of individual style rather than modes of discourse characteristic of the early Mādhyamika school. The three areas are: logical syntax, use of scripture,

¹⁵ *Ratnāvalī* verses 63-5 and 108-115. Compare with similar arguments in *Kārikā* chps. 2,5,7,9,11,19,20, and 27.

¹⁶ *Ratnāvalī*, verse 47, dealing with prior and simultaneous production (*prāg-* and *sahajāta*) echoes the argument about antecedent states of being in *Kārikā* chp. 9 and the discussion of previous and simultaneous causes in *Kārikā* chp. 6 (there the terms are *pūrva-* and *saha-bhāvaṃ*).

¹⁷ Cp. *Ratnāvalī* vs. 42 with arguments in *Kārikā* chp. 25.

¹⁸ Cp. *Ratnāvalī* vs. 41 and 64 with *Kārikā* 25.19-20.

and metrics. I will show that these elements are present in the *Ratnāvalī* while absent in the works of Nāgārjuna's closest disciple Āryadeva.

Though the examples of truly logical arguments are fewer in the *Ratnāvalī* than in the *Kārikā*, there are a few passages in the *Ratnāvalī* whose unusual logical syntax is remarkably similar to prominent verses in the *Kārikā*. Compare *Ratnāvalī* 365:

“Past and future objects and the senses are meaningless, [due to the preceding argument]. So too are present objects since they are not distinct from these two.”¹⁹

And the familiar verse from *Kārikā* chapter two:

“What has been traversed is not being traversed. What has not yet been traversed is not being traversed. What is being traversed, apart from what has been traversed and what is not yet traversed, is not being traversed.”²⁰

Both passages appeal to the law of excluded middle to eliminate a third term which common sense tells us must exist. Though Āryadeva treats similar topics in his *Catuhśataka* and *Śataśāstra*, he consistently avoids expressing the same ideas in this form²¹. There are also a number of verses in both the *Kārikā* and the *Ratnāvalī* displaying what we must assume to be a rather unusual syntax of the form “if *a* not *b*; if not *a* also not *b*.” For example:

Kārikā 20.15 “Without partaking of a union, how could cause give rise to an effect? But again, with the partaking of a union, how could cause give rise to an effect?”²²

¹⁹ Hahn, 83: “*bdaḡ phan ci dañ ci bya źes! ji ltar khyed la gus yod pal gźan phan ci dañ ci bya źes! de bźin khyod ni gus par mdzodll*”

²⁰ Poussin, 92: “*gataḡ na gamyate tāvad agataḡ naiva gamyate! gatāgatavinirmuktaḡ gamyamānaḡ na gamyate!*”

²¹ Cp. *Catuhśataka* v. 374 “About the completed it is said, ‘It exists’; about the uncompleted it is said, ‘It does not exist’. When the process of arising is non-existent, what, indeed, is it said to be?” “*jāyate ’stīti niṣpanno nāstīty akṛta ucyate! jāyamāno yadābhāvas tadā ko nāma sa smṛtaḡll*” [K. Lang, *Āryadeva’s Catuhśataka: On the Bodhisattva’s Cultivation of Merit and Knowledge*, (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1986) 142-3. Also see *Śataśāstra*, chapter 8 in G. Tucci, *Pre-Dinnaga Buddhist Texts from Chinese Sources*, (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1929), 65-72.

²² Another example can be found at 6.5.

Compare this to *Ratnāvalī* verse 68:

“If momentary, then it becomes entirely non-existent; hence how could it be old? Also, if non-momentary, it is constant; hence, how could it become old?”²³

Again, this way of phrasing the issue is unusual and I can find no examples of it in the writings of Āryadeva. This suggests that this way of phrasing an issue was peculiar to Nāgārjuna and not a way of expressing a thought characteristic of the Early Mādhyamika school more broadly.

1.3. Sūtra References in the *Ratnāvalī*

The *Kārikā* and the *Ratnāvalī* both give a prominent position to the same sūtras, and make use of those scriptures in remarkably similar ways. Taking the most obvious examples, some version of the *Pāṇḍeyyaka sūta* (*Samyutta Nikāya* III, 94-99) where the Buddha states that some questions are unanswerable (*avyākṛta*), is alluded to at a number of places in both works²⁴. Similarly, the teaching that dharmas are beyond existence and non-existence from the *Kaccāyanagotta sūta* plays a prominent role in the *Kārikā*²⁵ and also can be seen a number of places in the *Ratnāvalī*²⁶. We also find allusions in both works to the Buddha’s reluctance to teach as told in the *Ariyapariyesanā sūta*²⁷. That any Buddhist of the early centuries of the Common Era would allude to these sūtras is not unusual, but the way that Nāgārjuna’s two texts employ these two sūtras to justify the teaching of emptiness seems to be a distinguishing feature.

There is, however, a reference to a sūtra in both the *Kārikā* and the *Ratnāvalī* which seems to have been unknown even to the early Mādhyamika tradition:

Kārikā 18.6 “The Buddhas have provisionally employed the term *ātman* and instructed on the true idea of *anātman*. They have also taught that any ... entity as *ātman* or *anātman* does not exist.”²⁸

²³ Hopkins: “*Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation: Nāgārjuna’s Precious Garland* (Ithica: Snow Lion Press, 1988)”, 103. Also see verse 88.

²⁴ *Ratnāvalī* verses 73, 105-6, 115, and *Kārikā* 22.14, and chp. 27.

²⁵ It is mentioned by name at *Kārikā* 15.7

²⁶ *Ratnāvalī* verses 38, 42, 46, and 71.

²⁷ *Ratnāvalī* verse 103 and *Kārikā* 24.12.

²⁸ Poussin, *Prasannapadā* 355, “*ātmety api prajñāpitam anātmetyapi deśitaṃ|| buddhair nātmā na cānātmā kaścīd ity api deśitaṃ||*”

Ratnāvalī 103: “Thus neither the self nor non-self are said to be apprehended as real. Therefore the Great Subduer rejected views of self and non-self²⁹.”

Whenever Nāgārjuna says something to the effect of, “the Buddha says...” the Indian commentaries assume that he has a specific sūtra in mind. Of the three earliest extant commentaries, the *Akutobhayā* and the *Buddhapālitavṛtti* are the most conscientious about identifying the source of Nāgārjuna’s references. The curious fact about their comments on *Kārikā* 15.6, however, is that, while they both assume that Nāgārjuna is referring to a specific scripture here, they nevertheless seem hard-pressed to identify it. They both quote the “*Sāleyyaka Sutta*” of the *Majjhima Nikāya* as the source of this *Kārikā* verse. The text which they both quote is from a sermon in which the Buddha is explaining to a group of Brahmins which activities of body speech and mind lead to good destinies and which lead to foul. Among the thoughts leading to a foul rebirth are the thoughts: “this world does not exist. The other world does not exist. Beings who are spontaneously produced do not exist, etc.”³⁰ The *Akutobhayā* and *Buddhapālitavṛtti* take this passage as describing different dispositions of converts (*gdul bya = vineya*) upon entering the order. The teachings of self and non-self, then are to be seen as antidotes to a specific false view. This is a bit of a commentarial stretch considering the passage’s original context. The *Sāleyyaka Sutta* never mentions *ātman* and *anātman* as beliefs to be abandoned. The question remains why these early commentaries didn’t find a better proof-text. Certainly, stanzas 22, 93 or 154 of the *Suttanipāta*’s “*Aṭṭhakavagga*” would have been a better choice. An answer is suggested when we consider the commentaries of Bhāvaviveka

²⁹ Hopkins, 109. Cp. Hahn, 40.

³⁰ C.W. Huntington “The ‘Akutobhayā’ and Early Indian Madhyamaka” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1986), 432. “*gdul ba [sic] gañ dag la ’jig rten ’di med do ’jig rten pha rol med doll sems can brdzus te skye ba med do sñam pa’i lta ba de lta bu byuñ bar gyur pa de dag gi bdag med par lta ba bzlog pa’i phyir bdag go zhes kyang tags par gyur toll*”

Buddhapālitavṛtti Peking Tripitaka vol. 95, #5242, p. 273b: “*de la gdul bya gañ dag la ’jig rten ’di med do l ’jig rten pha rol med do l sems can rdzus te skye ba med do sñam pa’i lta ba de lta bu byuñ bar gyur ba l*”

Cp. *Majjhima Nikāya* I. 287. “...*natthi ayaṃ loko natthi paro loko natthi mātā natthi pitā natthi sattā opapātikā...*”

and Candrakīrti. Neither Bhāvaviveka nor Candrakīrti identify the *Sutta-nipāta* as the source of this quote. Both consider its source to be a Mahāyāna text, although they identify two different texts. Bhāvaviveka quotes from the *Suvikrāntavikrāmin Sūtra*³¹, while Candrakīrti quotes from the *Kāśyapaparivarta Sūtra*³². What is significant here is the textual histories of these two sūtras. According J.W. de Jong, the former text is fairly late — the *terminus ante quem* coinciding only with the dates of Bhāvaviveka (sixth century)³³. In other words, there is no evidence that the sūtra existed prior to Bhāvaviveka who mentions it in the sixth century, and hence it is unlikely that Nāgārjuna’s commentators (much less Nāgārjuna himself) could have quoted from it. The story is different with the *Kāśyapaparivarta*. It is, by all accounts, one of the oldest Mahāyāna texts, or at least it is one of the earliest to have reached China. The oldest translation into Chinese is ascribed to a certain Lou-jia-chan (婁迦讖) during the second century AD³⁴. Hence, it is historically quite possible that this is the sūtra to which Nāgārjuna is referring.

The passage in question, however, does not occur in this earliest translation³⁵. It does occur in the next extant translation (anonymous) finished

³¹ *Prajñāpradīpa*, Peking Tripitaka vol. 95, #5253, p. 233a: “*de ltar yañ ji skad du rab kyī rtsa la gyis rnam par gnon paḥ gjuḥ ni bdag gam bdag med pa ma yin nol de bzin du tshor ba dañḥ ḥ du śes dañḥ ḥ du byed rnam dañḥ rnam par śes pa yañḥ bdag gam bdag med pa ma yin nol*”

³² Poussin, *Prasannapadā*, 358.10: “*yathoktam āryaratnakūṭe! ātmeti kāśyapa ayam eko’ntaḥḥ nairātmyam ity ayaṃ dvitīyo’ntaḥḥ yad etad anayorantayor madhyaṃ tadarūpyam anidarśanam apratiṣṭham anābhāsam- avijñaptikam aniketam iyaṃ ucyate Kāśyapa madhyamā pratipaddharmāṇāṃ bhūtapraty avekṣetill*”

which is virtually identical to a passage in the *Kāśyapaparivarta*. Cp. *The Kāśyapaparivarta: A Mahāyānasūtra of the Ratnakūṭa Class*, Baron A. von Stäel-Holstein, ed. 1926; (Tokyo: Meicho-Fukyū-Kai, 1977), 87, paragraph 57.

Translation in Chang, ed. *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1996), 394. “Ego is one extreme, egolessness is the other, and [the two-in-one of] ego-egolessness is the middle, which is formless, shapeless, incognizable, and unknowable. [To realize] it is called the middle way, the true insight into all dharmas.”

³³ J.W. de Jong “Notes on Prajñāpāramitā texts: The *Suvikrāntavikrāmapariprcchā*” in *Prajñāpāramitā and related Systems: Studies in honor of Edward Conze*, L. Lancaster, ed. (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies, 1977) 187.

³⁴ Stäel-Holstein, ed., *Kāśyapaparivarta*, ix.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 87, paragraph 57.

sometime between 265 and 420 AD³⁶. If Nāgārjuna is indeed referring to this passage, then we have to conclude that during the first few centuries of the common era, some manuscripts of the *Kāśyapaparivarta* contained this verse and some did not. Whether or not Nāgārjuna was referring to this verse or one from the *Suttanipāta*, the case of the *Kāśyapaparivarta* is illustrative of the status of many texts in early India. Buddhist monks had access to Buddhist scriptures, but not all Buddhist monks had access to all Buddhist scriptures. And, just because a monk had access to a Buddhist scripture, we cannot assume that he had access to the same version that was available to other monks. The fact that Nāgārjuna refers to a scripture with which other members of the early Mādhyamika school were unfamiliar means that access to his version of that scripture was limited to a few members of the early school — perhaps even limited to Nāgārjuna himself since Āryadeva makes no references to this passage. The fact that the *Ratnāvalī* refers to a sūtra of which other early Mādhyamikas seem to have been unaware increases the likelihood that Nāgārjuna wrote it.

1.4. Poetic Style of the *Ratnāvalī*

The final aspect of Nāgārjuna’s work that I would like to introduce is the issue of his poetic style. The main work on this issue has been done by Tilmann Vetter in a 1992 article analyzing the statistics of the *Ratnāvalī*’s metrics and use of conjunctions in comparison with the same statistics from the *Kārikā*. His findings are, not surprisingly, inconclusive. The metrics of the *Ratnāvalī* do not diverge significantly from those of the *Kārikā*³⁷, and while the use of certain particles³⁸ and compounds does differ significantly³⁹, he nevertheless concludes:

³⁶ *Ibid.*, ix

³⁷ “The total number of *vipulā* forms in the *Kārikā* is 160, which is 18% of a total of 884 lines. The 14.4% in the *Ratnāvalī* does not diverge significantly from this figure, though the higher number of *ra-vipulā* in the *Kārikā*s and the occurrence of other *vipulā* forms should be kept in mind.” T. Vetter, “On the Authenticity of the *Ratnāvalī*,” *Asiatische Studien* 46.1 (1992): 501.

³⁸ “*Ca, eva, api, iti, vā, punaḥ* and *tu*” *Ibid.* 501.

³⁹ Vetter finds that the density of particles in the Sanskrit fragments of the *Ratnāvalī* is about half of their density in the *Kārikā*. Further, in the *Kārikā* 79% of the verses do

Concluding these remarks on style we might state: The observations are not so strong as to force us to deny the authenticity to the *Ratnāvalī*, but if it was composed by Nāgārjuna, it is difficult to imagine that it was written in the same period as the *Kārikās*.⁴⁰

There is nothing in Vetter's statistics to seriously challenge Nāgārjuna's authorship of the *Ratnāvalī*, and in fact his analysis provides us with an important suggestion. If the *Ratnāvalī* was written later in Nāgārjuna's life than the *Kārikā* we might be able to explain some of the slight divergences between the two texts. It should be remembered that Sanskrit was probably a secondary language for Nāgārjuna, and certainly the highly stylized metrical version used in his works was developed over years of practice. In ordinary speech, the use of compounds would have been less frequent — the conjunctive task being taken over by particles. As the author's poetic style developed over the years, the facility with making compounds would presumably increase. Vetter's statistics, then, do seem to indicate that the *Ratnāvalī* is a more mature work poetically if not philosophically. If, then, Nāgārjuna did write the *Ratnāvalī* he probably wrote it some years after the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*.

This hypothesis gains support when one considers that there are at least two arguments occurring in the *Ratnāvalī* that do not occur in the *Kārikā*. The first of these concerns the doctrine of momentariness. *Ratnāvalī* verse sixty-three begins a discussion of the three times. The argument is similar to those in the *Kārikā* until verse sixty-six, when the discussion shifts to the status of the moment (“*kṣaṇa*”). Verses sixty-six through seventy refute the possibility of momentariness in much the same way as each of the three times is refuted in the *Kārikā*. This argument is significant in light of the importance that this notion would play in the future of Buddhist philosophy (especially in the works of Dignāga, Dharmakīrti and Ratnakīrti) and in light of the fact that the concept is wholly absent from the *Kārikā*. The other argument in the *Ratnāvalī* that goes beyond the *Kārikā* is the argument asserting that the object of desire must be a false

not contain compounds, while in the *Ratnāvalī* only 51.1% do not contain compounds. (Vetter, 503)

⁴⁰ Vetter, 504.

construction since the image one attaches to is unitary while the senses that actually perceive it are five-fold⁴¹.

The latter argument seems to have been picked up by Āryadeva (in his *Catuhśataka* vs. 268), although he avoids arguments against momentariness in the *Śatakaśāstra*. There can be little question, however, of Āryadeva having written the *Ratnāvalī*. While Vetter's statistical analysis of the *Ratnāvalī*'s style is inconclusive concerning Nāgārjuna's authorship, it nevertheless does rule out Āryadeva as the author.

It may be noteworthy that the 303 lines of the Sanskrit fragments of Āryadeva's *Catuhśataka* as edited by Karen Lang... contain only a percentage of 2.3% *vipulā* (7 on a total of 303 lines), and only *ma-vipulā*. Āryadeva, so it seems, may be safely eliminated as a possible author of the *Ratnāvalī*...⁴².

In all, then, the evidence supporting Nāgārjuna's authorship of the *Ratnāvalī* is strong. It is ascribed to Nāgārjuna by a number of sources beginning in the sixth century and shows an affinity for common Mādhyamika doctrine. Finally, the *Ratnāvalī* contains many of the peculiar stylistic elements found in the *Kārikā* which are not found in other authors of the early Mādhyamika school — such as Āryadeva, Buddhapālita and the author of the *Akutobhayā*.

2. *Nāgārjuna's Dānapati was a Sātavāhana king*

The second sub-thesis to be established in dating Nāgārjuna is that Nāgārjuna's *dānapati* and benefactor was a Sātavāhana king. There are two factors that I would like to offer into evidence in support of this. First,

⁴¹ *Ratnāvalī*, vs. 351 When [all] five senses, eye and so forth
[Simultaneously] apprehend their objects
A thought [of pleasure] does not refer [to all of them]
Therefore at that time they do not [all] give pleasure.

352 Whenever any of the [five] objects is known
[As pleasurable] by one of the [five] senses,
Then the remaining [objects] are not so known by the remaining [senses]
Since they then are not meaningful [causes of pleasure].
Translation from J. Hopkins *Buddhist Advice*, 140] Cp. Hahn, 112.

⁴² Vetter, 501.

the earliest and latest dates for Nāgārjuna coincide almost exactly with the range of dates for the Sātavāhana dynasty. Second, the way that the hagiographical tradition about Nāgārjuna appears to have developed points to his association with a Sātavāhana king as one of its earliest elements.

2.1. Earliest and Latest Dates

That Nāgārjuna lived during the reign of a Sātavāhana king must be admitted as a possibility when the factors establishing his earliest and latest dates are considered. Obviously, Nāgārjuna is writing at a time when the early Mahāyāna sūtras have already been written. Since the earliest *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras are estimated to have been written around 100 BC, we may take this to be an earliest limit date for Nāgārjuna.

On the other end, the earliest of the datable external sources mentioning Nāgārjuna are several translations of the *Daśabhūmikavibhāṣa*, attributed in their colophons to Nāgārjuna. According to Lamotte:

... the Chinese catalogues list among the works translated by Dharmarakṣa at Ch'ang-an, between A.D. 265 and 313, a *P'u-sa hui-kuo ching* 菩薩悔過經. This translation is noted in the *Ch'u* (T 2145, ch 2, p. 8b 17), and the *Li* (T 2034, ch.6, p. 63a 23) which remark: "The colophon says that this is an extract from the *Daśabhūmikaśāstra* of Nāgārjuna". It therefore results that a work by Nāgārjuna had already reached China about A.D. 265.⁴³

Whether or not Nāgārjuna actually wrote the *Daśabhūmikaśāstra*, does not change the fact that two catalogues (both from the sixth century A.D.) record that a work was ascribed to someone named Nāgārjuna by 265 A.D. at the latest. This then is the earliest recorded date of an external source mentioning Nāgārjuna's name, and as such provides us with a date by which Nāgārjuna must have been an established scholar.

2.2. Testimony of Kumārajīva's school

A third century date is confirmed in the writings of Kumārajīva and his school. Kumārajīva indicates a third century date for Nāgārjuna's death

⁴³ É. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*, Sara Boin, trans. (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1994), xcvi.

in a statement at the end of his translation of Nāgārjuna's "*Biography*"⁴⁴ which claims that, "From that leave taking [i.e., from Nāgārjuna's death] until today one hundred years have passed"⁴⁵. Arguably, the "today" referred to is the time of Kumārajīva's translation of the text. According to Robinson.

It would be hard to defend every item in the *Biography*, but it is easy to show that in substance it represents Kumārajīva's account. Seng-juī mentions the *Indian Chronicle(s)* (*t'ien-chu-chuan*), which probably means the biographies narrated by Kumārajīva. Hui-yuan's biographical sketch of Nāgārjuna in his Preface to the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise* agrees with the *Biography* and many of his allusions are intelligible only with a knowledge of it. Seng-juī mentions the existence of temples to Nāgārjuna and Aśvaghōṣa, unfortunately without the date that occurs in the *Biography*. But the literary form and style of the *Biography* are typically Chinese. It has the standard opening, which states the man's native region and class, and then indicates that the child was precocious and received a good education. The laudatory clichés are purely Chinese and transparently do not stand for Indic originals. Insofar as it is genuine, this *Biography* must consist of Kumārajīva's oral account as worded by his disciples.... In this case, the point one hundred years after Nāgārjuna's death would be sometime during Kumārajīva's residence at Ch'ang-an (A.D. 401-13). Thus Nāgārjuna would have flourished in the third century A.D.⁴⁶.

The other set of dates for Nāgārjuna comes from a disciple of Kumārajīva named Sañ-jwei (So-yei), who places Nāgārjuna at the end of the time of the *xiang-fa* (象法 = *dharma pratirūpaka* or "Semblance dharma"⁴⁷). Correlating this information with the dates of Āryadeva recorded by another disciple of Kumārajīva, Uī comes up with a date of "about 113-213

⁴⁴ 龍樹菩薩傳 *TaishōShinshu Daizokyo* (hereafter, T.). 2047, lit. "The Chronicle of the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna." In the rest of this article, I will refer to it simply as the *Biography*.

⁴⁵ R. Corless, "The Chinese Life of Nāgārjuna," in *Buddhism in Practice*, Donald Lopez, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 531.

⁴⁶ R. H. Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China*, reprint (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), 25.

⁴⁷ Here I am following Jan Nattier's translation of the term. See J. Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), 86-9.

A.D.” for Nāgārjuna⁴⁸. Though this testimony relies on some rather strained calculations, it does suggest that Nāgārjuna may have lived in the third century A.D.⁴⁹

The period between the first century B.C. and the third Century A.D. roughly corresponds to the dates for the Sātavāhana dynasty (the dynasty ends sometime in the first two quarters of the third century). Hence, that Nāgārjuna *lived during the time* of Sātavāhana dynasty is a strong possibility.

2.3. Nāgārjuna’s Letters

The oldest extant sources testifying to Nāgārjuna’s connection with the Sātavāhana dynasty surround two works — the *Suḥṛllekha* and the *Ratnāvalī*. According to tradition, Nāgārjuna wrote these as letters to his patron king. The translations into Chinese and Tibetan are fairly consistent in naming this king. The earliest extant translation of the *Suḥṛllekha*, translated by Guṇavarman sometime after 431⁵⁰. Presumably, it is Guṇavarman who gives it the title 龍樹菩薩為禪陀迦王說法要偈⁵¹, which may be rendered as “The Essential Verses (*gāthā*) on Dharma Explained By the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna to King *Shan-ta-ka*.” This name for the *Suḥṛllekha*’s addressee can also be found in the 7th century in Yijing’s *Nan-hai ji-gui nei-fa chuan*, where the king is named “市寅得迦,” (“*shi-yin-de-ka*”)⁵². It is possible that both of these translate “Dhānya(ka)ṭaka” (modern Amaravati) the name of an important Sātavāhana site in the eastern Deccan. If this is the case, Guṇavarman and Yijing are telling us

⁴⁸ H. Ui, *The Vaiśeṣika Philosophy According to the Daśapadārtha-Śāstra*, 2nd ed. (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1962), 43. For Ui’s discussion of Nāgārjuna’s date, see pages 42–46.

⁴⁹ Using a similar method, one could try to come up with a date for Nāgārjuna’s birth based on the testimony of works such as the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, the *Mahāmegha Sūtra*, or the *Mañjuśrīmūlatantra*, which claim that Nāgārjuna was born 400, 700, and 400 years after the Buddha’s Parinirvāṇa respectively. Unfortunately, since we know nothing of the authors of these texts, we do not know when they thought the Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa* was. Hence, these dates are of little use.

⁵⁰ Guṇavarman was born in India in 367 and arrived in China in 431. Source: P. Demiéville, *et al.*, *Répertoire du Canon Bouddhique Sino-Japonais*, Fascicule Annexe du *Hobogirin* (Paris, L’Académie des inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Institut de France, 1978), 252 (q.v. “Gunabatsuma”).

⁵¹ T. 1672, 745b.

⁵² T. 2125, 227c 14–15.

important information concerning the king's capital. Yijing also claims that this king is a Sātavāhana (*Sha-duō-pó-han-na* 娑多婆漢那, which he translates as 乘士國⁵³).

Between 560 and 570⁵⁴, Paramārtha translated the *Ratnāvalī* into Chinese, though he does not name the author. He does, however, mention its addressee. The title of this translation in Chinese is 寶行王正論 which can be translated as “*Treatise on the Precious Course [Delivered to] King “Righteous.”*” In this same vein Xuanzang's use of *Yin-zhèng* 引正 (“leading to righteousness”) a century later to translate the Sanskrit name Sātavāhana (*Sha-duō-pó-he* 娑多婆訶⁵⁵), suggesting that Paramārtha may also be using the character 正 “zheng” (“righteousness”) as a (spurious) translation of “*Sāta*” (reading it as being somehow derived from the Sanskrit “*sat*” = “truth” or “righteousness”) to designate the king to whom the *Ratnāvalī* is addressed as King “*Sāta*[vāhana]”. A better explanation, though a more complicated one is that Paramārtha does use the character 正 to translate the sound “Sata”, but that this is not to indicate the Sātavāhana dynasty but rather one of the many Sata (Prakrit = “Sada”) kings. There are quite a few Sata/Sada kings mentioned in inscriptions found in inscriptions from Andhra Pradesh. Inscriptions and coins mentioning these kings have been found at Chebrolu, Dhanyakataka, Ramatirtham, Guntupalli, Vaddamanu, Nandayapallem and Velpur⁵⁶. The identity of these kings is a matter of some debate. Some scholars consider the kings whose last name ends in “Sada” to be rulers in the Sātavāhana lineage. Others consider them to belong to another dynasty. The debate over this issue seems to revolve around an inscription found at Guntupalli, a village in West Godavari District. The inscription reads as follows:

*Mahārājasa Kalinga(Ma)-
Hisakadhipatisa Mahā-
Mekhavāhanasa Siri Sadasa lekhakasa Culago-
Masa maḍapo dānaṃ*

⁵³ *Ibid.* Mabbett, using Pulleyblank, renders this into its Central Middle Indic equivalent as “*sa-ta-ba-xa-na^h*”. See Mabbett, 336.

⁵⁴ For a brief biography of Paramārtha, see P. Demiéville, (1978), 276.

⁵⁵ T. 2087, 929a 27.

⁵⁶ B.S.L. Rao *et al.* *Buddhist Inscriptions of Andhradesa* (Secunderbad: Ananda Buddha Vihara Trust, 1998), 54.

“Gift of a Mandapa by Cula Goma, the scribe of Mahārāja Siri Sada who belonged to the dynasty of Mahāmeghavāhana and had the title *Kaliṅga-Mahiṣakādhipati*”⁵⁷

This inscription clearly establishes a connection between the Sata kings and Mahāmeghavāha Khāravela of the Hathigumpha inscription and mentions the extent of his kingdom (namely, the area of Kalinga). D.C. Sircar suggests that the name was Sāta, indicating that this king was born to a Sātavāhana princess, but the form *Sada* often appears on Sātavāhana coins and hence is not necessarily a matronym. On the other hand, if we include the Sata kings in the Sātavāhana dynasty, we have to posit a collinear rule. Whether they were either independent from or under the suzerainty of the Sātavāhanas, the Sata kings seem to have been confined to coastal Andhra⁵⁸ throughout their reign which was roughly coterminous with that of the Sātavāhanas. In short, for the purposes of finding a date and location of Nāgārjuna, it will not matter much whether his patron king was a Sata king or a Sātavāhana as the time period and geographical range coincide with the most important evidence from the *Ratnāvalī* (see below). It is likely that Paramārtha, being from Ujjain, would have had access to important texts coming from coastal Andhra Pradesh since the two areas were culturally well connected and well traveled since the second century at least. Further, he would have passed through Kalinga on his way to China (he took a sea route).

In the Tibetan translations of these works the addressee of these letters is translated as “*bDe spyod*,” (“good conduct”) in the *Ratnāvalīṭīkā* by Ajītamitra⁵⁹, as well as in the colophon to the Tibetan translation of the *Suḥr̥llekha* by Sarvajñādeva⁶⁰. The meaning of this word is so close

⁵⁷ Rao, 109.

⁵⁸ There are a total of eight Sada/Sāta kings mentioned in inscriptions: Śrī Sada(sāta), Sivamaka Sada (Vaddamanu), Mānasada, Mahāsada, Asaka Sada, Aira Asaka Sada, Siri Mahasada and Siva Sada. Concerning their territory I.K. Sarma identifies Mahiṣaka with the Maisolia region. (Rao, 109-10)

⁵⁹ Ajītamitra, in the beginning of his commentary on the *Ratnāvalī*'s says: “*de la 'dir btsun pa 'phags pa klu sgrub 'jig rten mtha' dag la phan par bzed pas rgyal po bde spyod kyi dbaṅ du mdzad nas dam pa'i chos rin po che'i phreṅ ba dḡod pa'i ṅes pa mdzad de dam pa'i spyod pa daṅ mthun par!*” Yukihiro Okada, *Die Ratnāvalīṭīkā des Ajitamitra*, (Bonn: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 1990), 1.

⁶⁰ Nāgārjuna, *Golden Zephyr: Instructions from a Spiritual Friend*, L. Kawamura, trans., (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1975), 93.

to Xuanzang's translation for Sātavāhana ("leading right") that one cannot overlook the possibility, that it translates Sātavāhana.⁶¹ Most scholars take this to translate the name "Udayāna" following Scheifner⁶², but since there are no Sātavāhana kings by that name either in the Purāṇic accounts or in any inscription discovered so far, it is more likely that it is a translation of the name of the dynasty itself.

Thus, from the colophons of these translations, we have Nāgārjuna's patron identified as one of the Sātavāhanas whose personal name was something like "Jantaka." This personal name of Nāgārjuna's king is quite common in later Tibetan literature as well. While Mabbett thinks that this may be a version of the surname Sātkaṇṇi, so common among members of the Sātavāhana dynasty⁶³, this reconstruction cannot account for the fact that both Guṇavarman and Yijing explicitly represent a nasal sound in their transliterations. Again, it is more likely to be the place name, Dhanya(ka)taka.

2.4. The Elements of Nāgārjuna's Hagiography

This general agreement among the translators of Nāgārjuna's letters about the identity of Nāgārjuna's patron king needs to be placed in the larger context of legends about Nāgārjuna. Since none of the translators lived during the life of Nāgārjuna, we must consider the possibility that their sources of this attribution are the legends about Nāgārjuna that were circulating at the time of translation. Therefore, we must assess the hagiographical tradition surrounding Nāgārjuna before we can assess the testimony of these translators who likely drew upon it.

The earliest extant legends about Nāgārjuna were translated by Kumārajīva into Chinese in about 405 C.E.⁶⁴ After that, legends proliferate in Buddhist, Hindu, Siddha, and Jain sources. Although I discuss a number of these sources in what follows, this will not be an exhaustive review of

⁶¹ This was suggested by, J.W. de Jong, review of J. Hopkins and Lati Rimpoche, trans., *The Precious Garland and the Song of the Four Mindfulnesses* (London, 1975), in *Indo-Iranian Journal* 20 (1978): 137.

⁶² Scheifner trans., *Tārānātha's Geschichte des Buddhismus in Indien* (St. Petersburg, 1869), 2 note 2.

⁶³ Mabbett, 341.

⁶⁴ T. 2047.

all the legends told about Nāgārjuna. Much of the bibliographic spade-work and analysis of this material has already been done by Mabbett and others⁶⁵. This article offers instead a new interpretation of the evidence already available.

Legends of Nāgārjuna were compiled for over a thousand years in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan. When these legends are taken as a group the diversity and range of the stories is somewhat daunting. Even if we only look to these legends for information about Nāgārjuna's patron or place of residence, we are left with a number of problems. While most of our sources mention that Nāgārjuna's patron was a Sātavāhana⁶⁶, there are two dissenting voices in this regard. The first, the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (eleventh century) by Somadeva Bhaṭṭa, is a reworking of an earlier *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī* of Kṣemendra (also eleventh century), and the second is the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* by Kalhaṇa. The former work seems to be oblivious of any connection between Nāgārjuna and a Sātavāhana king insofar as it has one section of stories devoted to King Sātavāhana and a separate section for stories related to Nāgārjuna, who in turn is the associate of a King Cīrāyus ("Long-Life"). No place-name is associated with Nāgārjuna in this work. The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* by Kalhaṇa is a court history of Kashmir that is often discussed in modern works on Nāgārjuna. Kalhaṇa

⁶⁵ In addition to Mabbett's article, I recommend Phyllis Granoff's, "Jain Biographies of Nāgārjuna: Notes on the Composing of a Biography in Medieval India," in *Monks and Magicians: Religious Biographies in Asia*, Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara eds. (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1988), 45-61, and David G. White's *Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 62-77.

⁶⁶ This is mentioned by Xuanzang. See, T. Watters., *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India 629 A.D. – 645 A.D.* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1988), 201; Bāṇa see Bāṇa, *The Harṣa-Carita of Bāṇa*, Cowell and Thomas trans. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1961), 252; a number of Jain sources including the *Prabandhakośa*, see *Prabandha Kośa*, Jina Vijaya, ed., (Śāntiniketan: Adhiṣṭhāta-siṅghī Jaina Jñānapīṭha, 1991), 84; and the *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*, see *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi of Merutuṅgācārya*, Jinavijaya Muni ed. part I, (Śāntiniketan: Adhiṣṭhāta Siṅghī Jaina Jñānapīṭha, 1933), 119; Abhāyadatta's Lives of the 84 Siddhas, see Abhayadatta, *Masters of Mahāmudrā: Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas*, K. Dowman, trans. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 115; the *Rasendra Maṅgala*, see, White 155; Bu-ston, see Bu-ston, *History of Buddhism in India and Tibet*, Eugene Obermiller trans. Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica, no. 26 (Delhi: Sri Satguru Press, 1932, 1986 reprint, 127; and Tārānātha, see Tārānātha, *Tārānātha's History of Buddhism in India*, D. Chattopadhyaya, trans. (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1970) 109.

mentions Nāgārjuna as living at *Ṣaḍarhadvana*⁶⁷ during the reign of either Huṣka, Juṣka, or Kaniṣka.

When we come to the issue of Nāgārjuna's place of residence, the legends are much more diverse. Kumārajīva's translation of Nāgārjuna's legends mentions a rather vague "South India" (presumably "Dakṣiṇapātha") a number of times and also mentions that he spent a brief period in the Himalayas⁶⁸. Some (fifth century) versions of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*⁶⁹ (and the *Mañjuśrīmūlatantra*⁷⁰) claim that a monk whose name sounds like "Nāga" will live in Vidarbha⁷¹. Xuanzang has Nāgārjuna living 300 *li* to the south-west of the capital of southern Kosala at a mountain called "Black Peak," or "Black Bee"⁷². Candrakīrti in his commentary on

⁶⁷ On this site see Stein's note: "*Ṣaḍarhadvana*, 'the wood of the six Saints,' if rightly identified by the glossator as (*Harvan grāme*), is the modern village *Hārvan*, situated about one and a half miles to the N.W. of the gardens of Shālimār near Śrīnagar. On the hillside to the south of *Hārvan* ancient remains have come to light in the shape of highly ornamented brick pavements, which were dug up in the course of excavations conducted at the site in connection with the new Śrīnagar waterworks." See M.A. Stein, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr* (Srinagar: Verinag Publishers, 1961), 31 note 173. Could "*Ṣaḍarhadvana*" possibly be used in this story because it is a homonym for "Sātavāhana?"

⁶⁸ Corless, 528.

⁶⁹ This passage does not appear in the earliest version of the *Laṅkāvatāra* translated by Guṇabhadra in 443 C.E. It does appear in the versions translated by Bodhiruci (trans. 513 C.E.) and Śikṣānanda (trans. 700-704). The passage in question, according to Walleser, may possibly have been added in the fifth century C.E. because the section in which it appears contains a verse referring to Maurya, Gupta, and Nanda kings of the Kāli Yuga.

⁷⁰ Translated by J. Hopkins in *Buddhist Advice for Living*, 13. There are only three substantial differences between this prophecy and that of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*: 1) the number of years that he appears after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa increases to 400 years and his life-span increases to 600 years, 2) no place name is indicated, 3) he is the transmitter of the *Mahāmayūri* mantra. The *Laṅkāvatāra* is probably the earlier of the two, and what can be said of it can also be said of the *Mañjuśrī Mūlatantra* as far as its testimony of Nāgārjuna is concerned.

⁷¹ Hopkins cites 19th century Mongolian scholar Nga-wang-bel-den (b. 1797) who in his discussion of Jam-yang-shay-ba's work, "gives *be da* (misprinted as *pe da*) and identifies the place as Vidarbha (*be dar bha*)." [Hopkins, 10, note a]. Alternately, P.S. Shastri suggests that this "Vedalya" could also be "Dehali" which is a site near Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, the site of Vijaya Sātkaṛṇi's capital. See I.K. Sharma *Studies in Early Buddhist Monuments and Brāhmī Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa*, (Nagpur: Dattsons Publishers, 1988), 17. Also see, Mabbett, 335, note 32.

⁷² Watters, 201. Watters, by using two different Chinese glosses, reasons that "*Po-lo-lo-ki-li*" is probably a transliteration of *Bhrāmara-giri* (Bee-peak) which is confirmed

Āryadeva's *Catuhśataka* says that Āryadeva became Nāgārjuna's disciple after travelling in South India, perhaps indicating that Nāgārjuna lived there too⁷³. The Jain tradition⁷⁴ (which is also echoed by Al-beruni⁷⁵) consistently places Nāgārjuna at Mt. Satrunjaya in Gujarat⁷⁶, while the Buddhist and Siddha traditions consistently place him at Nalanda, Sri-parvata⁷⁷, Kancipuram⁷⁸, Dhanyakataka⁷⁹, Godavari⁸⁰, and Vidarbha. If we add Kalhāṇa's assertion that Nāgārjuna lived in Kashmir, then we have to admit that Nāgārjuna could have lived virtually anywhere in India.

Indeed, the range of dates and the conflicting traditions concerning Nāgārjuna's residence and royal patronage have led many to dismiss some of these sources or all of them. For instance, in his article, "Sur la formation du Mahāyāna," Étienne Lamotte complains:

A la tradition qui fait de Nāgārjuna un sujet des souverains Śātavāhana, on peut opposer le témoignage de la chronique cachemirienne qui le rattache aux rois Turuška du Nord-Ouest, Huška, Juška et Kaniška et lui assigne comme résidence le Bois des six Arhat près de Hārwan au Kaśmīr. Le Kośala méridional n'était point seul à posséder un Śrīparvata, c'est-à-dire, en sanskrit, un Mont Sacré: toponyme extrêmement répandu que la Mahābhārata et les Purāṇa appliquent à de nombreuses montagnes et qui désigne notamment un site du Kaśmīr. En ce qui concerne Nāgārjuna, *il est scientifiquement incorrect de retirer de leur contexte pour les grouper artificiellement ses prétendues attaches avec le pays Andhra. Les biographies et notices qui lui sont consacrées fourmillent de légendes, plus ahurissantes les unes*

by the 黑蜂 ("Black Bee") translation. He cites Beal's reasoning that "Black Bee" is a synonym for the Goddess Durgā or Pārvatī, and hence, *Po-lo-mo-lo-ki-li* is some form of "*Pārvata*" (literally meaning "mountain"). James Burgess, following this lead, identifies Nāgārjuna's abode with Śrī-Parvata, a well-known mountain on the Krishna River in modern Andhra Pradesh. Watters, 208

⁷³ See Lang, 7.

⁷⁴ Jain legends of Nāgārjuna have been discussed extensively in Granoff, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ Alberuni (writing in 1030), mentions that Nāgārjuna lived at a Gujarati site, "Fort Daihak" near Somnath, one hundred years previous to his writing. See Mabbett, 338.

⁷⁶ This is called "Dhaṅka" in the *Prabandha Cintāmaṇi* p. 119, and "Śatruñjaya" in the *Prabandhakośa* p. 84.

⁷⁷ Bu-ston, 127.

⁷⁸ Abhayadatta, *Buddha's Lions: The Lives of the Eighty-Four Siddhas*, J. Robinson, trans. (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1979), 75

⁷⁹ As both Bu-ston and Tārānātha assert.

⁸⁰ This attribution can be found in the *Tantra Mahārṇava*. See White, 113.

*que les autres et qui concernent au moins quatre Nāgārjuna différents...*⁸¹
[italics mine]

If the reports of the later traditions conflict, the question at this point is what to do with the testimony as it has come down to us in these traditions. Contemporary Buddhist scholars lean toward a kind of academic agnosticism when it comes to looking for historical evidence among legendary materials. As in Christianity's "Search for the Historical Jesus," the "Search for the Historical Buddha," has told us much more about the early compilers of the Buddhist suttas than about the Buddha himself. Recently, Jonathan Walters has proposed four ways of reading legendary materials, the first two of which are the "Historical Source Mode" (reading the texts for historical information about the subjects which they relate), and the "text of its day mode" (reading texts for historical information about the compilers/readers of the texts). The first of these modes is much maligned in his article in that it assumes that the authors of these legendary texts, "were somehow trying to objectively report historical facts in a would-be nineteenth-century European way." He concludes, "So long as this assumption remains operative, there is nothing to do except judge the suttas as though they had been compiled by Edward Gibbon; and given that they were not, the impasse reached by scholarship in this mode seems inevitable"⁸².

Although there may be very good reasons to assume an impasse in the "Search for the Historical Buddha," the same need not be assumed at the start for all figures in the history of Buddhism. This is, of course, not to say that we should read Nāgārjuna's legends as if they were BBC press releases. As rich as these legends are, they yield little in the way of historical evidence about Nāgārjuna. Nevertheless, I believe that some historical information can be recovered from these texts if we can imaginatively put ourselves in the world of the writers of these texts.

In order to interpret these legends, the most productive position is to assume that all pieces of information in the legends were included for a

⁸¹ Étienne Lamotte, "Sur la formation du mahāyāna," in *Asiatica: Festschrift für Friedrich Weller* (Leipzig: Otto Harrowitz, 1954), 388.

⁸² J. Walters, "Suttas as History: Four Approaches to the *Sermon on the Noble Quest* (Āryapariyeśana Sutta)," *History of Religions* (1999): 259.

reason. The purposive element will be stronger for those elements of the story that occupy a prominent place in the narrative. For those who are uncomfortable with the “intentional fallacy,” I will say merely that we must impute a purposefulness or a strategy to the text in order to interpret it in its historical context. In this way of reading the Nāgārjuna legends, we must start with Walter’s “text of its day mode.” In general, hagiographers compose their stories with two purposes in mind, spiritual edification and institutional legitimation. Elements of hagiographies put there for spiritual edification tend to echo or illustrate themes found in scripture, such as acts of altruism (Nāgārjuna offering up his head upon request in a number of these legends, echoes the kind of radical giving found in the *Vessantara Jātaka* and a number of Mahāyāna Sūtras). Elements of hagiographies put there for legitimation are sometimes more difficult to spot. These fall into two groups. In some stories, the character of Nāgārjuna is placed in juxtaposition to a person, place, or theme that is independently famous. For example, Nāgārjuna is often said to reside at a place called Śrīparvata. Śrīparvata was already famous by the time Nāgārjuna legends were being written as a powerful and auspicious place. By locating Nāgārjuna there, the character of Nāgārjuna takes on some of the (in this case, magical) legitimacy already associated with the site. Legitimation also goes the other way. Once Nāgārjuna became famous, his association with pilgrimage sites lent an air of legitimacy (and antiquity) to those sites (we may speculate that this is partly responsible for Nāgārjuna’s association with Nālanda in some of the post-tenth century legends).

If I am correct in describing the rationale for the composition of these stories, then we have a powerful tool with which to look for historical evidence. Any detail which is present in a story for the purposes of spiritual edification or for purposes of legitimation may be hypothesized to tell us more about the compilers of the legend than about the subject of the legend itself. These elements should be read in the “text of its day mode” and should not be assumed to tell us anything about Nāgārjuna himself. Note that the existence of such a literary device does not *prove* that there is no factual basis; an element of a story may serve the plot and also happen to be true. Nevertheless, the presence of such devices should make us question the historical accuracy of the information until we have some

reason to think otherwise. By the same token, if an element of the Nāgārjuna legend proves to be an early element in the tradition, and if it does not have an obvious role in edification or legitimation, then we have no choice but to assume that it was included into the hagiographies because it was “common knowledge” to the compilers of these texts. This does not mean that the information is objectively true, but rather that the compilers assumed that it was a given, a fact that their readers probably already knew. To contradict this information even in a legend probably would be equivalent to someone writing a legend about George Washington in which he becomes a benevolent ruler of Thailand. Few would buy it because it goes against what we believe is common knowledge. In the following, I will argue that Nāgārjuna’s association with the Sātavāhana king was this kind of information — which may be as close as we can come to “proving” his relation with the dynasty.

The Nāgārjuna legends are diverse, but the diversity seems to stem from a just a few factors. In the following, I will discuss what I see to be four sources by virtue of which the Nāgārjuna legends were legitimated. The first two are traditions, originally independent of the Nāgārjuna legend, that were drawn into the Nāgārjuna legend. The other two sources are thematic elements that can be found in all of Nāgārjuna’s legends, which take on a life of their own. Almost every element that occurs in Nāgārjuna legends can be attributed to at least one of these four sources, while some of the stories have multiple determinations.

2.5. Other Nāgārjunas

Other scholars who have tried to sort out the details of the Nāgārjuna legend have attempted to solve the problem by postulating more than one Nāgārjuna, or many authors using “Nāgārjuna” as a *nom du plume*: one Nāgārjuna who was a Mādhyamika philosopher, one who was a tantric adept, and one who was a medical practitioner. While this hypothesis should not be accepted without question⁸³, it also cannot be completely

⁸³ The multiple Nāgārjuna hypothesis has been most seriously criticized by J. Hua, in his article, “Nāgārjuna, One or More? A New Interpretation of Buddhist Hagiography,” *History of Religions* 10 (1970): 139-53.

dismissed. Clearly, there *were* a number of people harking to the name Nāgārjuna in the history of India. But this does not mean that these “other Nāgārjunas” were operating under a pseudonym, any more than the modern Telegu actor named Nāgārjuna is (Nāgārjuna is still a common name in Andhra Pradesh)⁸⁴.

The fact that there were a number of later Nāgārjunas, does not, however, help us sort out the details of Nāgārjuna’s hagiography. We cannot claim that all of the tantric/alchemical elements of Nāgārjuna’s hagiography belong to a seventh century “*tantric*” Nāgārjuna when these same elements appear in Kumārajīva’s forth/fifth century *Biography*. Furthermore, works ascribed to a Nāgārjuna such as the *Yogaśataka* and the *Rasendra Maṅgala* do not claim to be written by the same author as the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*⁸⁵ and are easy to distinguish. Thus, for the most part, the assumption of other Nāgārjunas will not help us much in sorting out the details of his hagiography.

There was, however, one other early Nāgārjuna (a Jain) who lived in the early fourth century A.D. who was incorporated into the Nāgārjuna legend translated by Kumārajīva. The Jain legend could be a source for Nāgārjuna’s association with Surāṣṭra/Gujarat in Jain sources and as well as a source for the stories of Nāgārjuna’s role in compiling the Mahāyāna sūtras. In Kumārajīva’s account of Nāgārjuna and a monk in the Himalayas we can discern a borrowing from Jain traditions of the Jain Third Council. This occurs shortly after Nāgārjuna is ordained and after he has mastered the *Tripiṭaka*.

Then [Nāgārjuna] sought other texts, but completely failed, so he went to the Himalayas. In those mountains there was a pagoda, and in that pagoda there was an old bhikṣu who gave him the Mahāyāna texts⁸⁶.

It is conceivable that this brief detail of Nāgārjuna’s biography was assimilated into the story from the (Śvetāmbara) Jain Ardhmāgadhī canonical

⁸⁴ White mentions a number of these other Nāgārjunas. Xuanzang met one of the disciples of Nāgārjuna, “who looked thirty despite his 700 years.” Similarly, there are a number of texts of a much later date written by authors named Nāgārjuna. The first of these is the *Yogaśataka* datable to the 7th or 9th century. Similarly, the 14th century *Rasendra Maṅgala* is ostensibly by a “Śrīman Nāgārjuna.” White, 75.

⁸⁵ White, 164.

⁸⁶ Corless 528.

text, the *Nandisutta*, where a Jain Nāgārjuna (unrelated⁸⁷) is said to be the disciple of a master named “Himavat.”

35. Homage to Nāgārjuna the teacher who was an able *śramaṇa* of Himavant, and who was the memorizer of the earliest (holy texts) and was the memorizer of the interpretation of the Kālika scriptures.
36. Homage to Nāgārjuna the canter, who taught the *Ogha śruta*, who attained the ability to recite in proper order and who was perfectly acquainted with subtlety and subtle things⁸⁸.

In the Jain tradition, as in the Buddhist tradition, there were four “Councils” to determine or confirm the scriptural tradition. The third of these Councils was held at Valabhi, in the first half of the fourth century and presided over by a monk named Nāgārjuna. This Nāgārjuna, according to the *Nandi Sutta* passage quoted above, had been the student of a certain “Himavat (“Snowy”), who entrusted Nāgārjuna with the memorization of the early Jain texts and the *Kālika śruta* (texts which are to be read at a specific time). The *Nandi Sutta* was probably composed sometime in the fifth century⁸⁹, but the story obviously dates back to the third Jain council itself. From the above, it seems likely that the Buddhist tradition (recorded by Kumārajīva) that Nāgārjuna received an important set of scriptures (the Mahāyāna sūtras) from a monk in the “Himalayas” (lit. “Snowy Mountains”), is borrowed from the Jain tradition that a Nāgārjuna, who was a student of “Himavant”, memorized two important sets of texts, the *Kālika śrutas* and the *Pūrva (śrutas)*. If the Jain legend of Nāgārjuna is indeed the source of the tradition that places the Buddhist

⁸⁷ If the Nāgārjuna of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is the same as the author of the *Ratnāvalī* then we can say that he definitely was not a Jain. *Ratnāvalī* verses 61-2 discusses the superiority of Buddhism to Saṃkhya, Vaiśeṣika and Jainism insofar as none of these have a teaching that is beyond existence and non-existence. Similarly, in verse 237 Nāgārjuna tells the king not to revere other religious specialists (*Tīrthikas*).

⁸⁸ A. Mahaprajna, ed. *Nandi: Prakrit Text, Sanskrit Rendering, Hindi Translation, Comparative Notes and Various Appendixes*, (Ladnun, Rajasthan: Jain Visva-Bharati Institute, 1997), 9.

V. 35 “*kāliyasuya-aṇu-ogassa dhāre dhāre ya puṃvāṇaṃ| himaṃvatakhamāsamaṇe vaṃde nāgajjunāyariē||*”

V. 36 “*mīu-maddava-saṃpaṇṇe aṇupuṃvvi vāyagattaṇaṃ pattel oha-suya-samāyāre nāgajjunavāye vaṃdell*”

⁸⁹ Natubhai Shah, *Jainism: The World of the Conquerors*, (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1998) 17.

Nāgārjuna in the Himalayas, then we have grounds to question the claim that Nāgārjuna was there. In later hagiographies of Nāgārjuna, the connection with the Himalayas is dropped and Nāgārjuna is only said to have received these texts from the *Nāga* kingdom. Nevertheless, the element of the story that claims Nāgārjuna to be the bearer of an important class of religious texts remains.

In terms of the effect of this connection, on the one hand, the character of Nāgārjuna receives some authority by a partial merging with the character of the more recently famous Jain Nāgārjuna. At the same time, Kumārajīva's story demotes the status of the Himalayan monk/Himavantācārya, thereby taking legitimacy away from the Jain tradition even as it borrows legitimacy from a Jain saint. Nāgārjuna learns what he can from this monk, but is dissatisfied and looks for other Mahāyāna sūtras elsewhere.

2.6. The *Mahāmegha* Prophecy and related Sūtras

One of the best ways to grant legitimacy to a Buddhist saint is to have his birth and career predicted by the Buddha. This was certainly the idea behind the prophecy about the monk “whose name sounds like *Nāga*” in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. There is another prophecy that may have factored into the construction of the Nāgārjuna legends — a prophecy that, in its original context was unrelated to Nāgārjuna but was conscripted into the Nāgārjuna legend at least by the time of Candrakīrti (seventh century). Like the Jain Nāgārjuna, this prophecy may also be a source for the legends locating Nāgārjuna's residence in Gujarat. On the other hand, we must also consider whether this prophecy could also be the source for the tradition associating Nāgārjuna with a Sātavāhana king. In his *Mādhyamakāvātāra*, Candrakīrti relates the following prophecy about Nāgārjuna:

Also from the *Mahāmegha* (Great Cloud) Sūtra in 12,000 [verses]: “Ānānda, this Licchavi youth called ‘Joy-When-Seen-By-All-Beings,’ when 400 years after my parinirvāṇa have elapsed, will be a fully ordained monk named *Nāga* [who will] spread widely my teaching. Finally, in the world realm called the ‘Pure Illumination,’ (Prasannaprabhā⁹⁰) he will become an arhant,

⁹⁰ Demiéville has, “*Suvisuddhaprabhābhūmi*.” See P. Demiéville, “Sur un passage du *Mahāmeghasūtra*,” appendix 2 of “Les versions chinoises du *Milindapañha*,” *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 24, (1924): 218.

a Samyaksambuddha, named ‘Jñānākāraprābha.’⁹¹ Therefore, by means of this *āgama* [Nāgārjuna’s prediction] has been necessarily, and unmistakably established⁹².

The section of the *Mahāmegha Sūtra* to which Candrakīrti is referring has the Buddha talking about the past and future lives of a certain Licchavi youth named “Pleasant-to-See-by-all-Sentient-Beings” (*sems can thams cad kyis mthoñ na dga’ ba*,). Versions of the prophecy concerning the lives of this youth also appear in the *Mahābherihārakaparivarta Sūtra*, and the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sūtra*.

The problem with this prophecy insofar as Nāgārjuna is concerned is that, while the earliest translation of the *Mahāmegha* into Chinese⁹³ does mention that a Licchavi youth will be reborn as the monk who will protect the dharma, it does not mention the monk’s name. The closest that this translation comes is to say that the Licchavi youth was formerly a mysterious *nāga* king⁹⁴, named Mahāvīryanāgarāja⁹⁵ (大精進龍王). The Licchavi is, however, associated with a Sātavāhana king in a future life⁹⁶. The Buddha foretells that 1200 years after his death, the Licchavi youth will be reborn to a *brahmin* in the kingdom ruled by a great South Indian king named Sātavāhana (*So-duo-po-he-na* 娑多婆呵那) whose kingdom is called 須賴吒 (*Surāṣṭra* — modern Gujarat). He will be born in a village called “*shan-fang-shi*” 善方使 on the river “*hua-huan*” 華鬢. During this lifetime he will become a monk who, among other things,

⁹¹ *ye śes ’byuñ gnas ’od*.

⁹² “*yañ ’phags pa sprin chen po stoñ phrag bcu gñis pa las kyañ kun dga’ po li tsa byi gzon nu sems can thams cad kyis mthoñ na dga’ ba źes bya ba ’di ni na mya ñan las ’das nas lo bži brgya lon pa na klu źes bya ba’i dge sloñ du gyur nas ñai bstan pa rgyas par rab tu bstan tel mthar gyi sa rab tu dañ ba’i od ces bya ba’i ’jig rten gyi khams su de bžin gšegs pa dgra bcom pa yañ dag par rdzogs pa’i sañs rgyas ye śes ’byuñ gnas ’od ces bya bar ’gyur ro źes gsuñs sol de’i phyir ’dis luñ phyin ci ma log par ñes par grub bol”* L. de la Valée Poussin, *Madhyamakāvātāra par Candrakīrti*, Bibliotheca Buddhica IX. (Osnabruk: Biblio Verlag, 1970) 76.

⁹³ Translation done by = “Dharmakṣema,” an Indian monk who arrived in China in 412. See Demiéville (1978), 243.

⁹⁴ . T. 387, 1100a7-8.

⁹⁵ This is Demiéville’s reconstruction. See, Demiéville (1924), 225.

⁹⁶ “The one who at that time was the *nāga* king Mahāvīrya is now the Licchavi, Priyadarśana, and will become the Bhikṣu who protects the dharma.”

T. 387, 1100b5-6. See Demiéville, 228.

teaches the *vaipulyasūtra* of the Mahāyāna, supports and lifts up the Dharma, and distributes this (the *Mahāmegha*) sūtra throughout the world⁹⁷. Thus, whoever this person is, he is associated with western India, and a Sātavāhana king. Given that there are a number of different versions of the *Mahāmegha Sūtra* in existence, we cannot rule out the possibility that Candrakīrti is actually quoting from the version that he knew, a version that is no longer available. However, given the fact that Nāgārjuna's name also does not appear in any other version of this prophecy⁹⁸, it seems more likely that Candrakīrti's statement reflects more of the reading practice of the Buddhist community that he represents than an actual textual variant.

Mabbett takes another of the *Mahāmegha*'s prophecies to refer to Nāgārjuna. This is the prophecy that occurs at the very end of the sūtra and discusses a certain princess who will be the daughter of a "Sātavāhana" (his reconstruction of 等乘) king on the south bank of the river "Kṛṣṇa" (黑闐) in a town called "Dhānyakaṭaka." (孰穀)⁹⁹ He concludes, "the *Mahāmegha Sūtra* therefore offers us a 'Nāga' and a 'Nāgarāja,' named in proximity to a prophecy about a Sātavāhana ruler at Dhānyakaṭaka"¹⁰⁰. Mabbett may be reading this sūtra too much through the lens of later Tibetan sources. Bu-ston and the other Tibetan historians do place Nāgārjuna at Dhanyakataka, but the version of the *Mahāmegha Sūtra* that Mabbett (through Demiéville) cites does not. The "proximate prophecy" to which Mabbett refers, occurs many pages after the prophecies attributed to Nāgārjuna by classical sources with nothing to link them. Furthermore, it is clear from the text that the Dhanyakataka story is a prophecy relating a future birth of the devī, who is a character in the story unrelated to the future-Bhikṣu/present-Licchavi/past-Nāgarāja.

Not all traditional authors were convinced that the "Nāga" to whom Candrakīrti alludes in this prophecy refers so unmistakably to Nāgārjuna.

⁹⁷ Demiéville, 227; T. 387, 1099c-1100a.

⁹⁸ The *Mahābherihāraparivarta Sūtra* does give a name to this monk, but that name is "Mindful." See Hopkins, p. 15. Similarly, the name Nāgārjuna is nowhere mentioned in the corresponding prophecy in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sūtra*. See J. Nobel, ed. *Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtra: Das Goldglanz-Sūtra*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill Publishers, 1950), 12-17.

⁹⁹ The Sanskrit is from Mabbett's reconstruction. See Mabbett, 337.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Bu-ston, for one, provides an extended quotation from the *Mahāmegha Sūtra* contextualizing Candrakīrti's citation, and then adds, "So it is to be read, but it is not clear, whether (this passage) really refers to Nāgārjuna."¹⁰¹ From the passage that Bu-ston quotes, it is clear that his version differs from Candrakīrti's, insofar as in Candrakīrti's version the monk is named *Nāga*, whereas in Bu-ston's version, the monk bears the name of the Buddha (presumably some form of "Śākya-"). Bu-ston explains that others have made this misattribution based on the fact that Nāgārjuna's ordained name is said to have been "Śākyamitra"¹⁰². Nevertheless, he remains skeptical.

Given that this prophecy probably had nothing to do with Nāgārjuna initially, the question of how its subsequent association with Nāgārjuna was justified in the minds of its interpreters becomes more significant. Why this prophecy? Was Nāgārjuna associated with this prophecy because it has a monk associated with a Sātavāhana king or is Nāgārjuna associated with a Sātavāhana king because he is associated with this prophecy? In order for Candrakīrti to make his interpretation of the text plausible, we have to assume that there was some element of the future Licchavi's life that corresponded to information that was already known about Nāgārjuna. Unlike the prophecy in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* that gives specifics of the monks philosophical activities, this prophecy does not tell us anything about the future monk's affiliations except that he is an advocate for the Mahāyāna and propagates the *Vaipulya Sūtras*. We are not given a name for this monk, so the attribution cannot be on similarity of name. *Nāgas* play a big part in the *Mahāmegha Sūtra* (a factor which will be discussed more below), but unlike the *Rājatarāṅginī*, the particular story in the *Mahāmegha* that is associated with Nāgārjuna is not a story about Nāgas, except insofar as the monk had been a *Nāga* king two births previously. Neither of these factors alone should have been enough to identify Nāgārjuna with this monk. The attribution of Nāgārjuna to the prophecy about the Licchavi youth only crosses the threshold of plausibility when these two elements are taken together *with the association with the Sātavāhana king*. The future, unnamed monk who in a past life was

¹⁰¹ Bu-ston, 129.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 129-30.

a *Nāga* king, who will teach the Mahāyāna, and associate with a Sātavāhana king in his future life, probably did sound like Nāgārjuna to Candrakīrti. Thus, we should see information about Nāgārjuna and the Sātavāhana king as leading to the association of Nāgārjuna with this prophecy, and not that Nāgārjuna is associated with this prophecy and therefore becomes associated with the Sātavāhana king.

2.7. Nāgas

There are a number of elements that occur in every story related to Nāgārjuna, and some elements that have a more isolated occurrence. I will examine two of these elements — *nāgas* and alchemy — to show how they have a bearing on his association with particular kings and place names.

Every account of Nāgārjuna has some etiological myth related to his name, i.e., some myth relating to *nāgas* or snakes. This is not the place to go into all of the cultural significance of *nāgas* in early India, but suffice it to say that *nāgas* were considered to be creatures of great magical power, who were often conscripted into the service of Buddhism in Buddhist legends. Nāgārjuna's connection to *nāgas* usually involves his receiving some gift or boon from a *nāga* king. In the *Harṣa-Carita*, this is an antidote to all poisons, a gift of the moon. In Kumārajīva's *Biography* and in the Tibetan historical tradition, the gift is the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. In these myths we see an attempt to tie the character of Nāgārjuna to some other element desirable to the hagiographer (such as alchemy or Mahāyāna Buddhism) through the instrument of his name.

Other associations made with *nāgas* are more complicated. Phyllis Granoff has identified this theme as one of the threads unifying all Jain biographies of Nāgārjuna¹⁰³. These stories are replete with *nāga* associations. The most obvious of these is the fact that in Jain hagiographies Nāgārjuna's father is the *nāga* king, Vāsuki. Subtler use of the *nāga* connection is made in Nāgārjuna's association with, Stāmbhana Tīrtha.

What makes Nāgārjuna's association with Stāmbhana Tīrtha possible is the sinuous snakes. Stāmbhana was in fact revered for being the locus of a magical image of the Tīrthamkāra Parśvanātha. Now biographies of Parśvanātha

¹⁰³ Granoff, 47.

are unanimous in pointing out connection between this Tīrthamkāra and the snake god Dharanendra. Nāgārjuna is said to have brought the magical image of Parśvanātha to Stāmbhana in the advice of his father the snake king, in order to make his elixir, in an act that now must seem almost natural in the associative world of these texts: the son of the snake God brings to the holy site the image of the *tīrthamkāra* protected by the snake deity¹⁰⁴.

As we have seen, *nāgas* are a contributing factor in Candrakīrti's association of Nāgārjuna with the *Mahāmegha Sūtra*. This sūtra is primarily a vehicle for transmitting a rain-making mantra. As such, the role of *nāgas* as both listeners of the sūtra and as characters in the story is emphasized. In addition to the Sātavāhana connection, Candrakīrti's association of Nāgārjuna with the Licchavi youth was probably aided by the youth's past life as the Nāgarāja (one cannot help but notice the play-on-words with "Nāgārjuna") Mahāvīrya.

The *nāga* connection played a more critical role in the assimilation of the Nāgārjuna legend into the chronicles of Kashmir in the *Rājataranṅiṇī*. In this work, Nāgārjuna and his Mahāyāna followers are credited with leading good *brahmins* away from the rites of the "Nīla[mata]purāṇa," with the result that the *nāgas* sent the snows to destroy the people. Those who did not adhere to Buddhism and still performed the rites were magically spared, while all of the Buddhists were destroyed. The snows only abated when a certain *brahmin*, Candradeva practiced austerities to please Nīla, "lord of the [Kashmir] Nāgas, and protector of the land." This Nīla then reestablishes the rites previously revealed in his *purāṇa*. The story is then summed up as follows: "As the first Candradeva had stopped the plague of the Yakṣas, thus the second brought an end in this land the intolerable plague of the Bhikṣus"¹⁰⁵. The entire story is a reworking of an older legend contained in the *Nīlamata Purāṇa*¹⁰⁶ with Nāgārjuna

¹⁰⁴ Granoff, 48.

¹⁰⁵ A. Stein, 33.

¹⁰⁶ See Stein 33, note 184. "K. refers here to the legend told in the *Nīlamata* (vv. 325 sq.) regarding the liberation of the land from the Piśācas. The latter... occupied Kaśmīr under a sentence of Kāśyapa during the six months of winter, while men lived there for the remaining six months only, and emigrated each year before the month of Āśvayuja. The deliverance of the country from the Piśācas and the excessive cold was effective after four Yugas through the observance of the rites which Candradeva, and old Brahman, descended from Kāśyapa, had learned from the Nīla Nāga... The story told by K[alhana]

imported into the beginning of the story to explain why the *Nāgas* were angry. That there were Buddhists in Kashmir was certainly common knowledge. The detail of Nāgārjuna at the head of the Buddhists seems to have been added as a poetic way to connect Mahāyāna Buddhists (we can assume that it was common knowledge by that time that he was a Mahāyānist) with a story about Nāgas. However, unlike the Jain stories, Nāgārjuna is the villain who is antagonistic to the *nāga* king, Nīla. Thus, pending any discovery to the contrary, the associations of Nāgārjuna with both Stāmbana Tīrtha and Kashmir should be regarded as serving a legitimating function in their legends and not as fact.

2.8. Alchemy

Another element common to all traditions concerning Nāgārjuna is that he was an alchemist. At the time that these legends were first composed (*ca.* fifth century), alchemy was of great interest in the courts and monasteries in India as well as in China. Whether one is trying to sell the Nāgārjuna legend to an Indian audience or whether one is trying to export the legend to a Chinese audience, claiming that the saint is an alchemist would have ensured the audience's attention. While the Jain tradition is perhaps the first to actually use the term "*rasayāna siddha*"¹⁰⁷ ("alchemist") to describe Nāgārjuna, this idea clearly has roots going back to Kumārajīva's stories of Nāgārjuna. In Kumārajīva's *Biography*, Nāgārjuna is credited with making an "elixir" (藥) of invisibility. In the story, he and some friends go to a magician for the formula. The Magician, wanting them to remain dependent on him, doesn't give them the formula, but gives them pills that they are to grind to a paste and put on their eyelids. Nāgārjuna smells the resulting paste and guesses its 70 ingredients along with their quantities. The theme of Nāgārjuna detecting the formula for an elixir appears again in the *Prabandhacintamāni*, where there it is an ointment for flying which he smells under the ruse

in i. 178-184 is obviously in particulars a mere rechauffé of the ancient legend. The charitable comparison between the Piśācas and the Bauddhas leaves no doubt as to the source from which K. borrowed it."

¹⁰⁷ For example, Rājaśekhara Sūri uses this term in his *Prabandha Kośa*, p. 85.

of washing his master's feet (the ointment works when applied to the feet)¹⁰⁸. In Xuanzang, Bu-ston, Tārānātha, and the *Prabandhacintamāṇi*, Nāgārjuna is credited with turning rocks into gold¹⁰⁹. In Xuanzang's account, this is done in order to help a Sātavāhana king out of financial straits, while in Tibetan accounts, it is done to feed the *bhikṣus*. Xuanzang reports that, "Nāgārjuna had the secret to long life,"¹¹⁰ though the source of this long life is not mentioned. In Bu-ston, Tārānātha, the *Bṛhatkathāmañjārī*, the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, and Jain sources, he is credited with producing an elixir of longevity. In the *Prabhāndhacintāmaṇi*, this is in order to prove his perfection of charity. In Bu-ston and Tārānātha this elixir is shared with the Sātavāhana king¹¹¹ whose life is prolonged thereby.

That Nāgārjuna is consistently associated with alchemy explains a number of details that we find in biographies of Nāgārjuna. Granoff points out that Nāgārjuna is associated with Padalīptācārya by virtue of the fact that the Jain master was "the best known of all wizards in the Jain tradition"¹¹². Of course, the *nāga* connection also played a role in the association, insofar as Padalīptācārya was the boon of the snake Goddess Vairothya to his barren parents. Further, according to the *Prabandhakośa*, Padalīptācārya was really named "Nāgendra."¹¹³ Nāgārjuna's connection to Padalīptācārya may be one of the rationales behind his association with Gujarat in general and Mt. Dhanka in particular. Padalīptācārya is associated with the mountain and Nāgārjuna is associated with the *ācārya*¹¹⁴.

¹⁰⁸ Granoff, 49-50.

¹⁰⁹ This theme also shows up (predictably) in tantric stories related to Nāgārjuna. White mentions two such incidents; one in the *Rasendra Maṅgala*, where Nāgārjuna promises the Goddess Prajñāpāramitā that he will turn Śrīparvata into gold. On the other hand, in a 14th century Telegu work, the *Navanātha* by Gauraṇa, the credit for this feat is given to Nāgārjuna's student (also named Nāgārjuna). See White, 166.

¹¹⁰ Watters, II: 201.

¹¹¹ In Xuanzang's account the length of the Sātavāhana king's life is also tied to Nāgārjuna's, but no elixir is mentioned.

¹¹² Granoff, 47

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 57.

¹¹⁴ The way to the association of Nāgārjuna with Gujarat is opened by his identification with the Surāṣṭriyan monk in the *Mahāmegha Sūtra* (Mt. Śatruñjāya is in Bhavnagar district, Gujarat).

The alchemical connection is also the inspiration for the story in the *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī* and the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, where the king is named “Cīrāyus” (“long-life”). Clearly, the king’s name is merely a function of a story about Nāgārjuna’s alchemical feat of producing an elixir of immortality. Finally, it is worth considering whether Nāgārjuna’s association with Śrīparvata may be an association made by his biographers solely through his association with alchemy, as the name Śrīparvata had strong associations with the study of alchemy dating back at least to the fifth/sixth century (when some of the earliest biographies were written). Nāgārjuna’s association with this site may be nothing more than the association of his alchemy with the most famous alchemical site.

In fact, the numerous stories about Nāgārjuna’s alchemical prowess may even confirm Nāgārjuna’s South Indian origin. This is because, while there are so many hagiographical details associated with alchemy, the curious fact is that there is no evidence that Nāgārjuna *was* an alchemist. Although there are a number of works surviving in the Tibetan canon which are ascribed to Nāgārjuna, according to White, “Of the fifty-nine works attributed to Nāgārjuna and translated, in the twelfth through thirteenth centuries A.D. into Tibetan in the Tanjur, none contains any alchemical material”¹¹⁵. This is a curious circumstance for a figure who became the alchemist *par excellence* not only in his own religious tradition but in the Hindu and Jain traditions as well. No other Buddhist figure has been so widely renowned for alchemy and appropriated into other traditions as an alchemist. Thus, the origin of the alchemical association requires some explanation.

In Kumārajīva’s *Biography*, we find three examples of Nāgārjuna’s magic (only the first of these feats is alchemy proper). The first story is Nāgārjuna’s mishap with the invisibility potion, the second is his magical battle with a *brahmin* and the third is his conversion of the south Indian king. At the beginning of each of these stories there is something to tell us that he is in South India. As a matter of fact, of the four times South India is mentioned, three of these introduce a story about his alchemy or wizardry. It should be kept in mind that while there are no

¹¹⁵ White, 70.

Indian sources from the fifth century which explicitly talk about alchemical practices, alchemy was already firmly ensconced in the popular imagination of the Chinese for whom Kumārajīva was writing. In fact, in Ge Hong's *Baopuzi*¹¹⁶ (ca. 320 A.D.) there is a discussion of an invisibility potion. It is quite possible that the early associations of Nāgārjuna with alchemy came from Kumārajīva trying to appeal to Chinese interests. The question remains why this practice would be associated with South India. The answer could be as simple as South India being a vast unknown region to Kumārajīva and hence the appropriate location for exotic heroes. Yet, by the time that Kumārajīva is writing, the trade routes between north and south are well traveled and the exotic South does not seem to be a major theme in the literature and drama of the day. This, coupled with the fact that, there are sources (such as Candrakīrti's *Catuḥśatakavṛtti*) which mention South India apart from any mention of alchemy, leaves us with the impression that, for Kumārajīva, Nāgārjuna's South Indian origin was probably a fact independent of his association with Alchemy.

So where does all of this leave us? Tracing the literary connections in the various legends of Nāgārjuna has led us to question the validity of Nāgārjuna's associations with Kashmir, the Himalayas, Mt. Dhanka, Stāmbhana Tīrtha, and Śrīparvata. Similarly, the stories of Nāgārjuna's association with King Cīrāyus, and with Huṣka, Juṣka, and Kaniṣka have also been called into question. The only element of these stories that does not seem to have been put there for specific sectarian/institutional/ideological motivations is Nāgārjuna's association with the Sātavāhana king. As far as his residence is concerned, we are left with three names that occur prominently in Nāgārjuna legends — Nalanda, Vidarbha, and possibly Dhanyakataka.

Nalanda cannot be taken seriously as a possibility for three reasons. First, it was not a strong monastic center until about 425¹¹⁷, i.e., after Kumārajīva's report that Nāgārjuna had been dead over one-hundred years. Second, Nāgārjuna's associations with Nalanda are confined to

¹¹⁶ J.R. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine, and Religion in the China of A.D. 320: the Nei P'ien of Ko Hung* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1966) 16.2a.

¹¹⁷ K. Satcidananda Murti, *Nāgārjuna* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1971), 50.

Tibetan Buddhist sources that are concerned with placing him in the transmission lineage for the *Guhyasamājantra*, a text that was important in the curriculum at Nalanda. Third, Xuanzang and Yijing both spent considerable time at Nalanda and studied Nāgārjuna's texts there. It is strange that they would have spent so much time there and yet heard nothing of a man whose works played such an important part in the curriculum.

Though absence of evidence cannot be taken as evidence of absence, the silence of the pre-tenth-century sources about a north Indian origin for Nāgārjuna should be carefully examined. Kumārajīva was born in Kucha, and at the age of nine, went with his mother to *Jibin* (罽賓 – Kashmir) where he received his early schooling. Presumably, it was in Kashgar that he studied and memorized the texts of Nāgārjuna¹¹⁸. If he was between fifty and sixty years old when he translated Nāgārjuna's *Biography* in Changan and testified that Nāgārjuna had been dead nearly one-hundred years, we may assume that Nāgārjuna had been dead considerably less time than that when he first studied his texts before the age of twenty. Given this, it seems unlikely that he would not have heard any news of Nāgārjuna having lived on the same trade route as the places where he (Kumārajīva) studied. By the same reasoning, Xuangzang, Yijing, and Huichao traveled to India during the sixth through eighth centuries and spent considerable time at Nalanda University, and none of them heard stories connecting Nāgārjuna with North India or with a North Indian king, while all of them (Kumārajīva included) heard stories connecting Nāgārjuna with South India and two of them heard of his association with a Sātavāhana king¹¹⁹.

Thus far, we have shown that all but two of the place-names associated with Nāgārjuna are associated with him for reasons of questionable historical value, and that sites and kings in North India are unlikely. The

¹¹⁸ Robinson, 72.

¹¹⁹ In this connection, however, it should be mentioned that Xuanzang visited Dhanyakataka and did not hear any stories about Nāgārjuna. I would argue that this case is different from that of Nalanda insofar as Nalanda was still a vibrant university when he visited there (and hence, one should expect some institutional memory of a former master to survive), whereas many of the monasteries around Dhanyakataka were deserted. See Watters, 214.

two remaining sites are in South India. Furthermore, the sites of Vidarbha and Dhanyakataka (provided this latter attribution does not come from the *Kālacakra sūtra*) do not seem to be connected to stories about alchemy or *nāgas*, and should be taken seriously as possible sites for Nāgārjuna's residence. Since these two sites had strong associations with the Sātavāhana dynasty, these sites may also lend their weight to the connection between Nāgārjuna and a Sātavāhana king.

The Sātavāhana connection finds further support in the fact that, while all of the elements in the Nāgārjuna hagiography discussed so far have some connection either to *nāgas* or alchemy, the Sātavāhana dynasty does not have strong connections to either. This is especially noticeable in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, where the legends of Nāgārjuna and those of Sātavāhana are separated. All of the stories about alchemy and *nāgas* go with Nāgārjuna while none of these elements are contained in the story of Sātavāhana. The Sātavāhana king is mentioned in the *Mahāmegha* legend, but as I argued above, it is unlikely that the *Mahāmegha* is the source of this information. In short, Nāgārjuna's connection to a Sātavāhana king seems to have occurred independent of any of the hagiographical patterns of legitimation we have discussed so far. True, in later hagiographical literature, it is not uncommon for a saint to have interactions with a king, but in most of these legends, the king is unnamed. It does help the legitimacy a saint to be associated with a king, but if this association were made up, we should expect to not see unanimity as to the name of the king. The diversity of the legends about what Nāgārjuna did with this king rule out a single, "ur-" source for this information. Hence, we are still pressed to explain why Nāgārjuna is associated with *this* dynasty. While there are a number of legends about Kaniṣka as a great patron of Buddhism, the only stories about a Sātavāhana king being a benefactor of Buddhism occur in conjunction with legends of Nāgārjuna. As far as the early Indian literary imagination was concerned, the Sātavāhana dynasty was probably not the best dynasty to attach your saint to. Until another explanation can be offered, we simply have no choice but to consider that Nāgārjuna's hagiographers assumed this information to be common knowledge. Thus, through a long process of elimination, the best reading of the information we have points to Nāgārjuna's residence in the Deccan during the reign of a Sātavāhana king.

3. *The Ratnāvalī and the Sātavāhana Dynasty: The Image of the Buddha*

Thus far, I have established that two facts are likely: that a Sātavāhana king was Nāgārjuna's patron and that Nāgārjuna was most likely the author of the *Ratnāvalī*. How do these two pieces of information get us closer to determining the date or the residence of Nāgārjuna? Simply put, the *Ratnāvalī* instructs the king to say a certain ritual formula three times a day in front of an "image of the Buddha," and to construct images of the Buddha "positioned on lotuses." If the arguments concerning Nāgārjuna's patron and his authorship of the *Ratnāvalī* are correct, then the it would have to have been written:

- a) during the reign of a Sātavāhana king
- b) at a time and in a region where Buddhas sitting on lotuses were a motif in use
- c) at a time and in a region where Buddha images were available as distinct objects of veneration and/or propitiation
- d) to a king who could have had access to an appropriate Buddha image to recite Nāgārjuna's twenty verse prayer

Although anthropomorphic images of the Buddha had wide currency around Gandhāra and Mathurā as early as the first century, during most of the Sātavāhana dynasty anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha were absent in the Deccan. In fact, very few of the Sātavāhana kings were alive at a time and a place to meet all of the above criteria for the *Ratnāvalī*'s addressee. In the following, I argue that probably the only Sātavāhana king meeting all three criteria is Yajña Śrī, and then only during the years when he ruled from Dhanyakataka. If the Purāṇic accounts concerning the length of Sātavāhana reigns are accurate, then the *Ratnāvalī* must have been written within a 29-year period somewhere in the area of the lower Krishna River valley.

In the *Ratnāvalī* there are three verses where Nāgārjuna mentions images of the Buddha¹²⁰.

¹²⁰ Wooden images of the Buddha are also mentioned in verse 2 of the *Suḥṛllekha*: "Just as the wise ones will respect a statue of the Sugata, even though it be made of wood [and] however [unadorned] it may be, so in the same manner, although this composition of mine may be pitiful, may you not criticize it, for it is based on the Sublime Teaching." See *Golden Zephyr*, 6. Guṇavarman's translation does not specifically mention wood, but refers to a "Buddha image which is carved and painted" (" ") T. 1672, p. 745b14. However, since Nāgārjuna's authorship of this text is more difficult to defend, I will shall limit our inquiry to the relevant verses of the *Ratnāvalī*.

- Verse 231: You should respectfully and extensively construct
Images of Buddha, Monuments, [stūpas] and temples
And Provide residences, abundant riches, and so forth¹²¹.
- Verse 232: Please construct from all precious substances
Images of Buddha with fine proportions,
Well designed and sitting on lotuses,
Adorned with all precious substances¹²².
- Verse 465: Therefore in the presence of an image [of the Buddha¹²³]
Or monument [stūpa] or something else
Say these twenty stanzas
Three times every day¹²⁴:

¹²¹ Translation of these verses is from Hopkins, 124-5 and 159. There is no Sanskrit available for any of these verses.

Tibetan: 231. *sañs rgyas sku gzugs mchod rten dañ\ gtsug lag khañ dag gus tshul dul śin tu rgya chen gnas mal sogsl rgya chen phyug pa bsgrub par mdzodll*

Variant readings: 231c [Narthang and Peking] “*gnas lam*” vs. “*gnas mal*” in Chone, Derge and in Rgyal tshab rje’s commentary on the *Ratnāvalī*. Hahn, 78.
. T. 1656, 498b26-27.

¹²² 232. *rin chen kun las bgyis pa yil sañs rgyas sku gzugs dbyibs mdzes śiñl legs par bris pa padma la\ bźugs pa dag kyañ bgyid do stsoill*

Variations: v. 232b Narthang and Peking have *legs śiñ* whereas Chone and Derge have *mdes śiñ*. 232d; Narthang and Peking have two lines: *bźugs pa dag la rin po chel kun gyis brgyan pa bgyid du gsoill*. The Chone and Derge versions, however, are confirmed by Rgyal tshab rje and Pāramārtha’s translation (below). Hahn, *Ibid*.

Dunne and McClintock write the following note: “The Zhol, Narthang and Peking editions of a slightly different reading. Following those editions, the verse would read as follows: “From all kinds of precious substances, please make well drawn and beautifully proportioned images of buddhas seated upon lotuses and adorned with all kinds of gems.” Dunne, and McClintock, *The Precious Garland: An Epistle to a King*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997), 118, note 50. My thanks to John Dunne and Wisdom Press for providing me with a copy of this translation.

Paramārtha’s translation:

(var. Ming mss. “ ”)

. T. 1656, 498b28-28.

¹²³ Both Dunne/McClintock and Hopkins translate “*sku gzugs*” as “icon,” which is certainly acceptable. For our purposes, however, “icon” could refer to any of a number of non-anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha (such as the empty throne, the *Buddhapāda*, etc.) prevalent in India until the third century CE. It should be noted that a more literal translation for *sku gzugs* would be “body-image.” Since the word *sku* is the respectful form for *lus* = “body,” it is implied that the image the king is to go in front of is an image of the Buddha’s body. The phrase is unequivocal in Paramārtha’s Chinese translation: Therefore, rise up determined and appear before a Buddha or caitya...”

¹²⁴ 465. *de phyir sku gzugs mchod rten gyil spyān śha ‘am yañ na gźan yañ ruñl tshigs su bcad pa ñi śu ‘dīl ñin gcig bźin yañ dus gsum brjodll* Hahn, 155.

. T. 1656, 504b 12-13.

That these verses refer to actual images of Buddhas (as opposed to Buddhas to be visualized in meditation) is clear from the context. Verses 231 and 232 begin a long list of construction and public works projects for the king to perform. Nāgārjuna is clearly not talking about meditation in this section. It is also likely that the image referred to in verse 465 was also a physical image, as this practice of using physical images in a Mahāyāna ritual context has been found in other sources contemporary with the *Ratnāvalī*¹²⁵. If Nāgārjuna lived at some distance from the king, we might refine our criteria further by stating that the motif of a Buddha on a lotus had to have been available at a time and in a place where Nāgārjuna could have been aware of it, whereas the king merely had to have access to a free-standing image of the Buddha (preferably one not embedded in a narrative context), in front of which he could perform this ritual. I am of course assuming that Nāgārjuna would not have suggested that the king go in front of an image of the Buddha knowing that such a thing did not exist where the king lived.

3.1. The Buddha Image in the Deccan

For a Sātavāhana king to be able to stand in front of an anthropomorphic image of the Buddha (as opposed to an iconic representation) and recite a formula, he would most likely have to have lived in the eastern Deccan sometime *after* the first century A.D. Though the western Deccan sites of Nasik, and Paithan were centers of Sātavāhana political activity

¹²⁵ Paul Harrison writes, "...there can be no doubt that by the second century C.E. some Buddhists were indeed practicing a form of *buddhānusmṛti* that... included detailed visualization of the physical body of the Buddha, and was accompanied by the use of images. The principle evidence for this is provided by a Mahāyāna sūtra called the *Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra*... the first translation of which was made by the Indo-Scythian Lokakṣema in 179 CE." Paul Harrison, "Commemoration and Identification in *Buddhānusmṛti*," in *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, Janet Gyatso, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 220. It is interesting to note in this regard that while Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Ugradattaparipṛcchā* and the late *Bodhisattvaprātimokṣa* mention a Mahāyāna ritual similar to the one that Nāgārjuna describes in the *Ratnāvalī*, the *Ratnāvalī* is the only text that instructs the adherent to stand in front of a statue or stūpa and not to stand in front of a (human monk?) Mahāyāna Bodhisattva.

until at least the reign of Yajña Śrī Sātakarṇi, (170-198 A.D.¹²⁶.) virtually no anthropomorphic images (sculpted or painted) of the Buddha have been found anywhere in the western Deccan during the Sātavāhana dynasty. Most scholars place the beginning of anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha in the Western Deccan much later, during the reign of Harisena (ca. 450-500 CE) of the Vākāṭaka dynasty¹²⁷. Thus, even if A.M. Shastri is right in claiming that Kumbha Sātakarṇi, Karṇa Sātakarṇi, and Śaka Sātakarṇi were the last three rulers of the Sātavāhana dynasty who ruled from Vidarbha right up to the beginning of the Vākāṭaka dynasty¹²⁸, it is still unlikely that any of these were Nāgārjuna's patron, because none of them would have had access to a Buddha image in that region. For this reason, any king who could have been Nāgārjuna's patron would have had to live in the eastern Deccan.

¹²⁶ Though the controversies surrounding the dates and chronology of the Sātavāhana dynasty are far from over, throughout this article I will use the dates provided by Shastri. See A.M. Shastri, *The Satavahanas and the Western Kshatrapas: A Historical Framework* (Nagpur: Dattsons, 1998), 131. Since I am fixing Nāgārjuna's dates to the reign of Yajña Śrī, one should adjust the dates of the former to correspond to discoveries concerning the date of the latter.

¹²⁷ See W. Spink, *Ajanta to Ellora*, (Ann Arbor: Marg Publications, 1967), 7-8. There is one notable exception. It is, however, an exception that perhaps proves the point. Marilyn Leese has documented two anthropomorphic images of the Buddha at cave 3 at Kanheri. These images (which she takes pains to prove were carved during the reign of Yajña Śrī) are quite small, only about a foot high, and are placed at the top of a pillar so as to be inconspicuous. She attributes their small size to their being modeled after portable images procured through trade with the north. See M. Leese, "The Early Buddhist Icons in Kanheri's Cave 3," *Artibus Asiae*, 41 (1979): 93. M.K. Dhavalikar, however, attributes their small stature to another motive: "[The Kanheri Buddha images] have been carved on the top of the pillar. No one can normally see it and it therefore seems highly likely that the sculptor had stealthily carved it without the knowledge of the donor." M.K. Dhavalikar, *Later Hinayana Caves of Western India*, (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1984), 66. Dhavalikar takes this as proof positive that the Buddha image had made it to the Western Deccan by the end of the second century, perhaps in order to support his claim that some of the shrine niches found at Kanheri may have contained wooden images of the Buddha. Be that as it may, the fact remains that no such images have been found. This coupled with the avoidance of any open anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha in stone or in paint, leaves us with the impression that whereas the Buddha image may have been known at this time, its representation was considered somehow distasteful.

¹²⁸ See A.M. Shastri, "The Closing Phase of the Sātavāhana Power and Allied Issues," in *Early History of the Deccan*, (Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1987): 38-44.

There are only a few places in the eastern Deccan which were home to Sātavāhana kings. It appears that Puḷamāvi, Sivamakaskandha Gautamiputra and Yajña Śrī Sātakaṃbi may have ruled from Dhanyakataka and Vijaya ruled from Nagarjunakonda (also known as Vijayapura). It is not known from whence the last two Sātavāhana kings listed in the Pūrāṇas, Candraśrī and Puḷumāvi II, ruled. It is possible that Candraśrī continued to rule from Nagarjunakonda as the one inscription mentioning him comes from Kodavolu in Godavari district. Using this same reasoning, however, we would have to place the last Sātavāhana king far west of Nagarjunakonda, due to the fact that Puḷumāvi II's only surviving inscription was found at Myakadoni in Bellary district, Karnataka¹²⁹. In the following, I will explore the art history of these regions to determine which of these kings would have had access to an image of the Buddha.

At this point a note should be added about the nature of art historical evidence available to us. All of the work that has been done on the relative chronology of art in India during the period that concerns us has been on art carved in stone. The reasons for this are obvious. Images made of materials that decay or break simply have not survived. Clearly, the Buddha could be represented in other media, such as paintings and wooden or clay sculptures. The earliest mention of the figure of the Buddha, refers to a painting¹³⁰. Similarly, literary evidence for the representation of the Buddha on cloth can be found in the “*Rudrāyanāvādānam*” of the *Divyāvādānam* where there is a legend that king Bimbisāra allowed his image to fall on a piece of cloth in order that his image might be painted¹³¹. Such portable images of the Buddha were popular at the time of Yijing where we have testimony of the use of portable drawings of the Buddha by travelling monks¹³². Finally, M.K. Dhavalikar notes that there are

¹²⁹ H.P. Ray, *Monastery and Guild: Commerce under the Sātavāhanas*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 40.

¹³⁰ See R.C. Sharma, *Buddhist Art of Mathurā*, (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1984), viii-ix.

¹³¹ R.C. Ray 144, Vaidya, *Divyāvādānam* p. 466.

¹³² “The priests and the laymen in India make Kaityas or images with earth, or impress the Buddha's image on silk or paper, and worship it with offerings wherever they go. Sometimes they build stupas of the Buddha by making a pile and surrounding it with bricks. They sometimes form these stupas in lovely fields, and leave them to fall in ruins. Any one may thus employ himself in making the objects for worship. Again when the

wall sockets for installing wooden images in a number of caves at Kanheri¹³³.

Indeed, the issue of what kind of representation is intended in the *Ratnāvalī* is ambiguous in the absence of the Sanskrit original. Both the Chinese and Tibetan indicate that the images of the Buddha are to be drawn or painted (Paramārtha “畫” Tibetan “*bris pa*”). Both of these terms, however, could translate the Sanskrit *√likh*, (lit. “to scratch” but also “to write” or “to draw”). It is possible that the *Ratnāvalī* is referring to the practice of scratching a line drawing of the subject on the rock before sculpting¹³⁴. This translation assumes that the Buddha images were drawings or paintings (as opposed to sculptures or statues). Whether paintings of the Buddha existed during Sātavāhana times is difficult, at our present state of knowledge, to know. Paintings from Sātavāhana times have been found in the western Deccan, but none of the Buddha. The Chinese and Tibetan translations do not allow us to reconstruct the Sanskrit with any certainty; the Chinese seems to point to some form of *√likh* whereas the Tibetan *bgvis pa*, “to make” suggests some form of *√klyp*.

While we do not know if cloth paintings were in use at the time of the *Ratnāvalī*, we do know quite a bit about the art history of the time. Though there is no need to assume that stone sculpture was the only form of art at this time, we would need to come up with a special explanation of why the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha (on a lotus, no less) should be portrayed in non-stone artworks when it is consciously avoided in stone sculptures. Until such an argument can be made, we must assume that the motifs of non-stone artworks generally mirrored the motifs seen in stone works.

Our task, then, is to determine when the motif of the lotus-pedestal first appears in the eastern Deccan. In the eastern Deccan, Art Historical scholarship has really only focused on two sites: Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. I will discuss some of the relative dates of images from these

people make images and Kaityas which consist of gold, silver, copper, iron, earth, lacquer, bricks, and stone, or when they heap up the snowy sand (lit. sand-snow), they put in the images or Kaityas two kinds of śāriras. The relics of the teacher, and the Gāthā of the chain of causation.” J. Takakusu, *A record of the Buddhist religion as practiced in India and the Malay archipelago* (A. D. 671-695), (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1896), 150-151.

¹³³ Dhavalikar, 51.

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Rosen Stone, *The Buddhist Art of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa* (Delhi: Motilal Banar-sidass, 1994), pl. 187.

sites and assume that the sequence was the same at other sites in the region unless we have a reason to think otherwise. A considerable amount of work has been done on the art sequence at the Amaravati stūpa. The most recent work is that of Anamika Roy, who has done a thorough investigation of the epigraphy, art and architecture of that site, in order to determine its chronology. On the basis of her findings, she outlines the development of the site into four distinct phases¹³⁵. The first phase goes from *ca.* third century B.C. to first century A.D., and contains no anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. During this time, while quite a number of Buddhist narratives are portrayed in sculpture (both narratives from the life of the Buddha as well as his past lives), an anthropomorphic image of the Buddha is conspicuously and uniformly avoided. In its place, we find the Buddha represented symbolically by the Bodhi tree, the *dharmā cakra*, etc. This avoidance of representing the Buddha anthropomorphically seems to be a Deccan-wide phenomenon and not confined to any particular sect in the Deccan during this period.

The second phase spans the first century A.D. and includes the first anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. Roy lists two examples of this early form of the Buddha in catalogue numbers 187 and 188 of the Madras Government Museum. These are both hybrid representations of the Buddha; images that use both symbolic representations as well as anthropomorphic depictions. Significantly, both depictions of the Buddha from this period have the Buddha sitting on either throne (“*paryāṅka*”) or a long seat (“*āsandī*”)¹³⁶ in *abhāya-mudrā*.

The third phase marks the height of Buddhist art at Amaravati and lasts roughly until the second half of the second century. It is during this phase that the majority of the *Jātaka* tales were carved on the rail copings. In this phase, no new anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha appear, and the style again reverts to symbolic manifestations¹³⁷.

¹³⁵ These phases are actually a revision of the four phases first proposed by Sivaramamurti, “Amaravati Sculptures in the Madras Government Museum”, *Bulletin of the Madras Government Museum*, 4 (1956), 26-32.

¹³⁶ For a discussion of these seats, see Sivaramamurti, 136-7.

¹³⁷ A. Roy, *Amarāvati Stūpa: a critical comparison of epigraphic, architectural, and sculptural evidence*. (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1994), 138.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that the previously installed Buddha images were taken away during this period.

The Sātavāhana kings who might have ruled over the area during to these two artistic periods (and hence would have had access to an image of the Buddha) were Puṣumāvi I, Vāsiṣṭhīputra Sātakarṇi, Siva Śrī, and Sivamakasada. Possibly Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi was late enough to be included in this list, although all inscriptions bearing his name locate him in the western Deccan.

It is unlikely, however, that any of these kings was the king to whom the *Ratnāvalī* was addressed. The reason is that during this artistic phase there is no evidence for the existence of the lotus throne (*padmapīṭha*) motif in the Deccan area this early. Even at Gandhāra and Mathurā during the Kuṣān dynasty, where the anthropomorphic depiction of the Buddha begins quite early, the vast majority of Buddhas are depicted as sitting on three-tiered rectangular platforms whose flat front face served as a place for an inscription or an additional motif¹³⁸. Buddhas depicted on lotus thrones in that region tend to be dated to the third century or after¹³⁹. At Mathurā, sometime toward the end of the second century, we find cushions made of *kuṣa* grass added to the simple pedestal on which the Buddha sits, but no lotus thrones¹⁴⁰. Coomaraswamy, places the advent of the lotus throne motif sometime during the second century, but does not offer any more precision as to the time or the place of its advent¹⁴¹.

¹³⁸ For examples of this motif, cf. N.P. Joshi and R.C. Sharma, *Catalogue of Gandhāra Sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, (Lucknow: The State Museum, 1969).

S. Nagar, *Gandhāran Sculpture: A Catalogue of the Collection in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia*, (Columbia: The Museum of Art and Archaeology, 1981).

¹³⁹ See, Nagar. There are, perhaps, some early exceptions from Sikri, which Sir John Marshall dates to the first century CE. See. J. Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara: the story of the early school, its birth, growth, and decline* (Karachi: Dept. of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan, 1973), 56 and plate 50.

¹⁴⁰ See R.C. Sharma, plates.

¹⁴¹ Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, (New Delhi: M. Manoharlal, 1972), 39. Precursors to the *padmapīṭha* can be found earlier. For example, in the State Museum of Lucknow, there is an image of Hārītī whose feet rest on a square base decorated with lotus petals. See N.P. Joshi and R.C. Sharma, *Catalogue of Gandhāra Sculptures in The State Museum, Lucknow*, State Museum catalogue series; no. 3 (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh State Museum, 1969), fig. 68 (accession num. 47.105). At Bharhut, there are two medallions with reliefs of Śrī Lakṣmi standing on a lotus rising out of a *pūrṇa-ghaṭa* and a *yakṣī* standing on a lotus. See B. Barua, *Barhut: Aspects of Life and Art*, book III,

Unfortunately, it is precisely this precision that we need if we are to date the *Ratnāvalī* from its mention of a lotus base (“*padmapīṭha*,” “*padmāsana*,” or “*kamalāsana*”). If, however, we can assume that a Sātavāhana king ruling over either Dhanyakataka or Nagarjunakonda patronized Nāgārjuna, then we need only to look for a rough date of the first *padmapīṭha* in this area to find a lower limit for the composition of the *Ratnāvalī*.

Roy does not discuss the advent of the lotus pedestal motif in the art of Amaravati, but a review of the documented sculptures from Amaravati containing this motif reveals that each of them belongs to her fourth phase of sculpture and to the second part of the fourth epigraphic phase. There are relatively few sculptures from Amaravati exhibiting this feature. We find it on a pillar (Madras Government Museum [MGM] 247), a frieze decorated with alternating Buddhas and stūpas (MGM 256), a drum slab (British Museum [BM] 79) and a railing pillar (BM 11). All of these are dated by Roy to be from the third century or after (Roy’s fourth phase), as they all share stylistic features common to whose Buddha images date from the second half of the third century)¹⁴². The fourth and final period of Amaravati art, according to Roy, was marked by a change in artistic style. The human forms are noticeably more elongated. Fortunately, there is also a change in epigraphy which corresponds to this stylistic change. The epigraphy becomes more ornate, characteristic letters being a notched “*ba*” and a “*pa*” with a descending hook (𑀧 and 𑀧)¹⁴³. It is the latter development that distinguishes the writing style of Śiva Skandha’s Amaravati inscription from that of his immediate successor, Yajña Śrī¹⁴⁴. Of the four images depicting a Buddha on a lotus from Amaravati, three of them have inscriptions. The inscription on MGM 247 is of little help for

(Calcutta: Indian Research Institute Publications, 1934-5) pls. LXVI. 79, LXVII. 80 and LXVIII. 81. Similarly, (and perhaps related) there is a beautiful image of the Buddha’s mother, Māyā, sitting on a lotus (also rising out of a *pūrṇa-ghaṭa*) from Sāñchī. See Marshall and Foucher, *Monuments of Sāñchī*, vol. 2, (Delhi: Swati Publications, 1982.) pl. 41.

¹⁴² The same dates are also concluded by Robert Knox for the pieces in the British Museum. Cf. R. Knox, *Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stūpa*, (London: British Museum Press, 1992), 60, 139-40.

¹⁴³ See Roy, appendix 4, table 4.

¹⁴⁴ Compare tables 3 and 4, *Ibid*.

dating the image¹⁴⁵. The inscriptions on BM 79 and MGM 256, however, do seem to belong to the same period as their sculptures, and Roy assigns both of these inscriptions to the second part of the fourth epigraphical phase (*ca.* third century A.D.). Though the drum slab (BM 79) containing this motif has an inscription, Roy is somewhat uncertain of her dating of it. Her best guess is that it belongs to the fourth phase of epigraphy at Amaravati:

BM no. 79...: Half of the inscription is chipped off. Out of the remaining few letter forms, only one word *Bhadanta* is intelligible and on the basis of these few letters, we may tentatively date it in the late 2nd or early 3rd century A.D. (Fourth phase)¹⁴⁶.

The inscriptions must, however, be more recent than the sculpture, because parts of the inscription continue between the heads of the uppermost figures of the frieze. Hence, Robert Knox's comments on the date of the sculpture will be relevant.

The extreme, fleshy naturalism of the carving of this relief places it at once in the Amarāvati High Period. In the tightly packed, nervously energetic decoration of the slab it falls easily into the 2nd phase of the 3rd century AD¹⁴⁷.

With all of the examples of the lotus pedestal placed in the fourth epigraphic and sculptural phase of Amaravati, we may reasonably place the writing of the *Ratnāvalī* within the same period, because it is only in this phase that we find the motif of Buddha standing and sitting on lotus flowers.

To what extent can we translate this into a range of dates? Of key importance to this study is the fact that, on epigraphical and stylistic

¹⁴⁵ Roy (p.152) describes this piece as follows: "The carving on this fragment is divided into three panels. The uppermost shows a stūpa surmounted by an umbrella and the lower panels show the haloed figure of the Buddha on a lotus pedestal. Between the second and the third panels there are two inscriptions belonging to two different periods. One belongs to the first century BC, while the other belongs to the 7th century A.D. Moreover, the sculpture does not belong to the period of either of the inscriptions. It seems that the first inscription was engraved on the plain octagonal pillar in the 1st century B.C., and that this pillar was then recarved in the 3rd century A.D. Subsequently, in the 7th century A.D. another inscription was engraved on it."

¹⁴⁶ Roy, 198.

¹⁴⁷ Knox, 141.

grounds, the dome slab with the Buddha standing on lotuses discussed above belongs to the same epigraphic phase (Roy's IV.2) as the dome slab mentioning the reign of Yajña Śrī Sātakarṇi.

The latter inscription is not by Yajña Śrī himself but from an *upāsaka* from Ujjain.

1. Sidham rājño Gotamapu[trasya] Śrī-Yajña-[Sa]-takaṇṣiya saṃvatsare ...
... vāsa-pa 5 divase 8 Ujjayini-upasakena
2. Jayilena ... mahācetiye ... kārītam ...
3. ... Dhanakaṭa-cetiya¹⁴⁸

Unfortunately, while the inscription tells us that it was donated on the eighth day of the fifth fortnight of the monsoon, the regnal year is missing. Thus, all we know is that this was inscribed sometime during the reign of Yajña Śrī Sātakarṇi (which, by Purāṇic accounts, lasted 29 years). As the sculpture on which the inscription is found still uses a non-anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha, we might assume that it was carved near the beginning of the fourth phase of Amaravati art and that it pre-dates our Buddhas on lotuses discussed in the *Ratnāvalī*. This allows us to date the *Ratnāvalī* no earlier than the reign of Yajña Śrī (last quarter of the second century).

The reigns of the three Sātavāhana kings succeeding Yajña Śrī were fairly short (Vijaya six years, Candra Śrī three or ten years, and Puḷumāvi III seven years). Hence, if Nāgārjuna wrote the *Ratnāvalī* during the reign of a Sātavāhana king and during a time when the *padmapīṭha* motif was available, it would have to be written within a period of fifty-two years. However, not all of these kings ruled from Dhanyakataka/Amaravati. We know from an inscription found at Nagarjunakonda, that Vijaya Sātakarṇi had moved the capital to that site which is about one hundred kilometers distant¹⁴⁹. While the Buddha image (with or without lotuses) continued to be produced at Amaravati, upstream at Nagarjunakonda, artists and/or patrons showed a reluctance to use anthropomorphic images

¹⁴⁸ H. Sarkar, "Some Early Inscriptions in the Amarāvati Museum," *Journal of Ancient Indian History* 4.1-2 (1971): 8.

¹⁴⁹ H. Sarkar, "Nāgārjunakoṇḍa Prakrit Inscription of Gautamīputra Vijaya Sātakarṇi, Year 6," *Epigraphia Indica*, 36 (1965-66): 273-275. A number of other inscriptions refer to Nagarjunakonda as "Vijayapūri." Cf. Vogel, "Prakrit Inscriptions from a Buddhist Site at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa," *Epigraphica Indica* 20, (1920-1930): 22.

of the Buddha at all. In fact, the first images of the Buddha at this site can only be dated to the reign of Mātharīputra Vīrapuruṣadatta (236-260 A.D.)¹⁵⁰ or later. The first Buddha in a non-narrative context (i.e., carved for the purpose of worship) only comes into existence during the time of Ehuvala Cāntamūla (261-285 A.D.)¹⁵¹. Thus, while images of the Buddha on a lotus existed in the Deccan during the reign of these last three Sātavāhana kings, it is unlikely that such an image was available to any king living at until the time of the *second* Ikṣvāku king (i.e., *long* after the Sātavāhana dynasty was over).

Though the location of the other two kings is uncertain, it appears from the location of their inscriptions that they also were not at Amaravati¹⁵². Until more is known about the reign of these last two monarchs, it would be dangerous to speculate about the availability of Buddha images to them. The only surviving inscription mentioning Puḷumāvi II comes from the eighth year of his reign and is located at Myakadoni in Bellary district in Karnataka. If Puḷumāvi II had in fact relocated to that area, then it is unlikely that he would have had access to an image of the Buddha even at his late date. Nevertheless, we cannot rule either of these last two kings out as possible patrons for Nāgārjuna simply because we do not know enough about them. If, however, further investigation finds that they continued Vijaya's rule from Nagarjunakonda, they would be unlikely candidates for Nāgārjuna's king. By process of elimination, this leaves us with Yajña Śrī Sātakarṇi (ca. 175-204 A.D.) as the most likely candidate for Nāgārjuna's patron, with Candraśrī (ca. 210-213 or 210-220 A.D. – the *purāṇas* do not agree about the length of his reign) and Puḷumāvi II (ca. 213-220 or 220-227 A.D.) as other possible candidates. If Nāgārjuna's patron had been a Sata/Sada king (as suggested by Paramārtha's translation of the *Ratnāvalī*), the date does not change because the few images of the Buddha found elsewhere in coastal Andhra certainly do not predate those of Amaravati. Therefore, the best determination we can make of the composition of the *Ratnāvalī* has to be between 175-204 A.D.

¹⁵⁰ For the dates of the Ikṣvāku kings, see H. Sarkar, "The Nāgārjunakoṇḍa Phase of the Lower Kṛṣṇā Valley Art: A Study Based on Epigraphical Data," in *Indian Epigraphy: Its Bearing on the History of Art*, ed. F. Asher and G.S. Gai (New Delhi, 1985), 31.

¹⁵¹ Stone, 17.

¹⁵² H. Ray, 40.

or between 210-227 A.D, somewhere in the Lower Krishna Valley, with the earlier dates being more likely than the latter.

4. *Conclusion*

I have argued throughout this paper, the date and location of Nāgārjuna is dependent, in part, on our conclusions concerning two factors: Nāgārjuna's proximity to the Sātavāhana dynasty and his authorship of the *Ratnāvalī*. Under these conditions, the *Ratnāvalī* must have been written during the reign of Yajña Śrī, because prior to his reign, there is no evidence for the motif of Buddhas on lotuses in the Sātavāhana kingdom. This hypothesis will hold until someone either discovers an earlier image of a Buddha on a lotus, until someone establishes that this motif existed in some other medium while it was being avoided in stone, or until someone finds convincing evidence proving that Nāgārjuna did not write the *Ratnāvalī*.