

"Exegesis, Commentary, and the Evolution of Abhidharma: Evidence from Early Gāndhārī Manuscripts"

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Abstract

In attempting to trace the development of early Indian Buddhist exegetical methods and delineate the emergence of Abhidharma, we encounter one major roadblock: namely, the paucity of both textual and extra-textual evidence that dates from the crucial, formative period. Fortunately, we now have commentarial and scholastic texts in Gāndhārī dating from the 1st-2nd cents CE and predating the regularizing redaction that yielded the later canonical literature and other individually preserved Abhidharma texts. These Gāndhārī texts exhibit a range of stylistic features and interpretative techniques that allow us to speculate about the evolution of the commentarial and scholastic genres as a whole. In addition, as unique textual witnesses that lack parallels in other extant collections, they also expand our knowledge of Abhidharma to include previously unknown, early Indian Buddhist exegetical traditions.

First, a brief overview of the 16 Gāndhārī commentarial and scholastic texts will highlight the range of exegetical methods that they employ and offer a tentative chronology for the development of the genre. Then, a more in-depth treatment of three specific texts will reveal exegetical innovations and will challenge certain assumptions concerning the development of Abhidharma: namely, (1) the Gāndhārī commentary on the Saṅgītisūtra, which employs a revisionist, organizational structure; (2) British Library (BL) fragments 20+23, which utilizes a catechetical format combined with a less formalized, discursive style; and (3) BL 28, a polemical text focused upon a single doctrinal issue. Finally, the evidence presented by these early Gāndhārī exegetical texts will be used to reconstruct the possible context and function of the commentarial and scholastic genre in this early period.