

Abhidharmic elements in an early Mahāyāna sūtra from Gandhāra

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Among the newly discovered manuscripts from Gandhāra there are three genres which most probably can be considered as authentic products of a Gandhāran literary tradition: Avadāna texts, scholastic and commentarial texts and early Mahāyāna *sūtras*. While Āgama and Vinaya texts were translated from Eastern originals into the language of the North West, these autochthonous genres can help to understand the specific intellectual situation in Gandhāra during the first centuries before and after the beginning of our era. There is no need to stress the importance of this information for the evaluation of the role Gandhāran Buddhism played in the formation of ideas and concepts and their transmission to Central and East Asia.

In my presentation I want to discuss the data of the so-called Bajaur Mahāyāna *sūtra*, preserved on a more than 2 meters long birch-bark scroll from the Bajaur Collection of Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts. The text is currently being edited by Andrea Schlosser and Ingo Strauch in the framework of a collaboration between the project “Buddhist Manuscripts from Gandhara” at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, Munich and the Chair for Buddhist Studies at the University of Lausanne.

It is well-known that early Mahāyāna *sūtras* make in their discourses intensive use of categories developed in Abhidharmic circles of traditional (= “Mainstream”) Buddhism. In the Bajaur Mahāyāna *sūtra* two such discourses can be observed in a prominent position. The first of them is found in a *śrāvaka* context. It discusses the qualities of an *āryaśrāvaka* with regard to his ability to develop a specific attitude towards the character of *dharmas*.

The second - much larger - discourse is devoted to the capacities of a Bodhisattva. The central term used here is *saṃjñā*, to be translated in this context as “notion”. According to our text, people walking on the Bodhisattva path are expected to refrain from any kind of notions. This idea is declined along various dogmatic categories, such as the elements of individuality (*ātman*, *sattva*, *bhāva*, and *jīva*) up to the five *skandhas*.

It is the aim of my paper to determine the position of both discourses - the one on the character of *dharmas* and the one on notions (*saṃjñā*) - within the broader context of Abhidharmic and early Mahāyāna literature. Special focus will be given to the terminology used in the Gandhāran text and the doctrinal lists which served as models for the *sūtra*'s argumentation.

It can be expected that the results of this approach help to understand the intellectual and institutional contexts in which Mahāyāna originated and the specific role, which the region of Gandhāra played in this process.