

## NAKED PHILOSOPHERS: THE BRAHMANS IN THE ALEXANDER HISTORIANS AND THE ALEXANDER ROMANCE

THE encounter of Alexander the Great with the Indian Brahmans or Oxydorkai/Oxydracae forms an important episode of the Alexander Romance<sup>1</sup> as well as featuring in all the extant Alexander historians.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this paper is to consider how far the various accounts reflect genuine knowledge of India in the sources in which they are based,<sup>3</sup> and to what extent the episode in the Alexander Romance diverges or adds to them and to what purpose. A future paper will consider the development of the episode in later works, Geneva Papyrus inv. 271 and *Palladius De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus*, as well as the *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*.

The episode in the Romance brings out explicitly several of the main themes of the work, including Alexander's desire for immortality and world dominion, as well as his submission to the divine order. His claim in his reply to the Brahmans that he goes on conquering because 'the master of my soul' will not allow him to stop encapsulates the moral conundrum that the authors of the Romance works on Alexander were trying to encompass: how could the great hero, the world conqueror, also and simultaneously be a sage with a line to God, and a mortal subject to death like anyone else? What were the limits of his power?

The meeting in the Alexander Romance falls into three parts. First, Alexander receives a letter from the philosophers in which they outline a policy which might be described as nonviolent resistance. Their nudity is emphasised here, and their lack of built dwellings. (In this latter feature they resemble the Indians of Herodotus iii 100 who take no life, sow nothing and build no houses). Then Alexander visits them and asks a series of ten questions or riddles. At the end of this section Alexander asks to meet the philosophers' leader Dandamis, who is lying on a couch of leaves surrounded by fruit. Dandamis outlines their ascetic way of life, living off the trees and water of the Euphrates (*sic*) and describes how they mate with their wives once every new moon until they have produced two children. Alexander then offers them gifts, and they all beg him for immortality. This he explains that he cannot give, and offers a kind of credo which justifies his own succession of conquests. He then offers Dandamis gold, bread,

<sup>1</sup> There are three Greek recensions of the Alexander Romance (A, β and γ), of which the earliest (A) is not later than AD 300 and may be essentially Hellenistic: see the introduction to my Penguin translation of the Romance (1991). It contains some historical material but except in rare cases cannot be used as historical evidence. The encounter with the Brahmans appears in all three recensions at 3.5 ff., and in γ also at 2.35a. In the A recension, chapters 3.7-16 reproduce *Palladius De Bragmanibus*, which also appears in γ after 2.35a. (See further n. 4). In A, chapter 17 is the Letter of Alexander to Aristotle about India, which becomes a third person narrative in recension β and its derivatives. For convenience I cite my own translation, which is based on the expanded β-recension, L, edited by H. van Thiel, *Leben und Taten Alexanders von Makedonien* (Darmstadt 1983), plus additional material from the other recensions.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander historians: *FGrH* 134 Onesicritus, *FGrH* 133 Nearchus, *FGrH* 139 Aristobulus. On these see L. Pearson, *The lost histories of Alexander the Great* (Chico, CA 1983); T.S. Brown, *Onesicritus: a study in Hellenistic historiography* (Berkeley 1949); P. Pédech, *Historiens compagnons d'Alexandre* (Paris 1984), 104-14. The other major classical source on India is Megasthenes (*FGrH* 175): the fragments are collected in translation in J.W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian* (Calcutta, Bombay and London 1877). See also Otto Stein, *Megasthenes und Kautilya*, *Abh. Kaiserl. Akad. Wien* cxci 5 (1922).

<sup>3</sup> On Greek knowledge of India see the general accounts of E.R. Bevan, 'India in Greek and Roman literature', *Cambridge History of India* i (1922), 351-83; J.W. McCrindle, *op. cit.* (n. 2) and *The invasion of India by Alexander the Great* (London 1896) and *Ancient India described in classical literature* (Westminster 1901, repr. Delhi 1979); C. Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde* (Leipzig 1847-62); R.C. Majumdar, *The classical accounts of India* (Calcutta 1960); J.W. Sedlar, *India and the Greek world* (Totowa NJ 1980); K. Karttunen, *India in early Greek literature* (Helsinki 1989)—his work stops short of the period of Alexander; A. Dihle, 'The conception of India in Hellenistic and Roman literature', *PCPS* n.s. x (1964), 15-23; B.N. Puri, *India as described by early Greek writers* (Allahabad 1939); better is the same author's later book, *India in classical Greek writings* (Ahmedabad 1963).

wine and olive oil; Dandamis accepts the oil and Alexander departs.<sup>4</sup>

This episode occurs in a different form in the Alexander historians, Onesicritus, Aristobulus and Plutarch. This paper will argue that both Romance and historians reflect a common source and that the Romance does preserve some genuine information about Indian sages.

#### WHO ARE THE BRAHMANS?

In the Alexander Romance, Alexander advances from his conquest of Porus on the Hydaspes (Jhelum) in late June 326 BC. 'He took all the treasure from the royal palace, and marched on to the Brahmans, or Oxydorkai. These were not for the most part warriors, but philosophers who lived in huts and caves.' In this tale the author of the Romance has conflated two separate historical events, an encounter with Indian philosophers at Taxila in spring 326, shortly before the conquest of Porus,<sup>5</sup> and Alexander's campaign against a people whom Arrian and Diodorus<sup>6</sup> call the Brachmanes, who are located on the lower Indus below the kingdom of Musicanus, and whose last stronghold was the city of Harmatelia, perhaps ancient Brahmanabad, very close to the modern (and ancient) Mansura, 47 km NE of Hyderabad.<sup>7</sup> The view that the Brahmans were an Indian people recurs in classical literature, for example in Pliny<sup>8</sup> who states that *Bragmanae* was a name applied to a number of Indian tribes. This mistake is paralleled in

<sup>4</sup> The meeting in the Alexander Romance is greatly expanded in the work of the fifth-century Palladius, *De Gentibus Indiae et de Bragmanibus*, which contains a much longer version of Dandamis' speech but does not include the question-and-answer episode. An earlier version of Palladius' work has been discovered on papyrus (Pap. Genev. inv. 271) and is generally interpreted as a Cynic diatribe, which Palladius adapted to his own purposes.

Palladius' work has been interpolated in two of the three main recensions of the Greek Alexander Romance, but does not feature in any of the eastern or western derivatives of the Greek Romance which derive from the lost recension δ\*. The short medieval Greek prose *Life of Alexander* does not contain the encounter with the Brahmans at all, and hence neither does the popular *Phyllada tou Megalexantrou*. However, the meeting does feature in the Byzantine poem on the Tale of Alexander known as the *Rimada*, where it follows the same pattern as in the beta versions of the Romance, without the additions of Palladius.

The meeting does appear in Julius Valerius iii 10 ff, which derives from A: it concerns the Brahmans or gymnosophists who live 'among the Oxydorkai'. The question-and-answer session is given in oratio obliqua, and there is no gift-giving at the end of the episode. In the second Latin translation, by Leo the Archpriest (10th century AD), known as the *Historia de Proeliis* (ed. F. Pfister, Heidelberg 1913), the people are the Oxidraes who 'dicuntur gymnosofistae'. (iii.5). The episode is very brief in Leo, containing neither Alexander's 'credo' nor the gift-giving.

A further variant on the meeting is represented by a Latin work known as the *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo*, (ed. F. Pfister, *Kleine Texte zum Alexanderroman*, Heidelberg 1910) which consists of a long debate in epistolary form on the merits of the Brahmans' ascetic life, in the course of which Alexander criticises them heavily. No Greek original of this text is extant, but one is likely to have existed since the episode is incorporated in all the interpolated versions of the *Historia de Proeliis*. (See H.J. Bergmeister, *Historia de Proeliis: Synoptische Edition der Rezensionen des Leo Archipresbyter und der interpolierten Fassungen J<sup>1</sup>, J<sup>2</sup>, J<sup>3</sup>*, Meisenheim am Glan 1975). One result of this addition is that the meeting with the Brahmans actually appears twice, in different forms, the first time treating them under the name of gymnosophists or naked sophists, and corresponding to the meeting in the Romance, and the second under the name of Brahmans, incorporating the *Collatio*. See for example R. Schell, *Liber Alexandri Magni: Die Alexandergeschichte der Handschrift Paris, B.N. n.a. 1.310* (Munich 1989), pp. 170 f. and 178 f f.

In addition, the meeting with the Brahmans is one of only three episodes from the history of Alexander deemed worthy of inclusion in his chronicle by the ninth-century writer George the Monk. (The other two are Alexander's meeting with the High Priest in Jerusalem, which reads like a fashion show report, and the story of Candace.) George's account of the Brahmans is clearly based on Palladius', though he seems also to have been using Bardaisan of Edessa's work on barbarian customs, *de Fato*.

<sup>5</sup> Arr. *Anab.* vii 2.

<sup>6</sup> Arr. *Anab.* vi 7 and 16; D. S. xvii 102-3.

<sup>7</sup> J.W. McCrindle, *The invasion of India by Alexander the Great* (1896), 355 f. Arr. *Ind.* 4.9 places the Sydracae (i.e. Oxydracae) at the confluence of the Jhelum and the Chenab, which conflicts with the location of his *Anabasis*. See P.A. Brunt, *Arrian* (Loeb) ii p. 468.

<sup>8</sup> Plin. *N.H.* vi 64; J.W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian* (1877) 133.



the use of other caste names as if they were the names of peoples, for example the Sodrae (Sudras—low caste) of Diodorus.<sup>9</sup>

There were Greek writers who understood the correct application of the name Brahmans. One

<sup>9</sup> D. S. xvii 102.4. Dionysius Periegetes refers to Σάβαι καὶ Τόξιλοι ἄνδρες Σκόδροι δ' ἐξέτης. Thirlwall wishes the names to be those of two races containing predominantly the respective castes—quoted by McCrindle (n. 7) 351—surely too neat a solution.

was Nearchus,<sup>10</sup> who explained that the Indian ‘sophists’ were divided into two groups, Brahmans who acted as advisers to the king, and ascetics who busied themselves with the study of natural phenomena. Megasthenes too, the Seleucid ambassador at the court of Chandragupta (321-297 BC),<sup>11</sup> distinguished between the priestly Brahmanes and the ascetic Sramanas, who appear in the Greek texts as Garmanes. In general the Brahmans in the proper sense are referred to by Greek writers as philosophers or sophists, for example by Plutarch.<sup>12</sup> Arrian once<sup>13</sup> makes clear their identity, when he refers to Alexander putting to death ‘those of the Brahmans, the Indian philosophers, who had been responsible for the revolt [of Sambus].’

The Oxydorkai, on the other hand (who are called the Oxydracae in Arrian and other authors), are an Indian people of the region, the Kshudrakas. They are associated with the Malloi (Malavas), as well as other peoples, in the *Mahabharata*.<sup>14</sup>

There is one text besides the Alexander Romance which identifies the Brahmans with the Oxydorkai or Oxydracae: that is Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.<sup>15</sup> In the latter, the king of India explains to Apollonius a common misconception: the sages whom Alexander encountered, he explains, were actually the Oxydracae, a warlike race who make false pretensions to wisdom. ‘But the genuine sages live between the Hyphasis and the Ganges, in a country which Alexander never assailed.’<sup>16</sup> The interest of this passage is that it shows that, in the tradition known to Philostratus, the identification of the Brahmans and Oxydracae had already been made; Philostratus, I suggest, was acquainted with the Alexander Romance, or at least with the legend in the form in which it appears in the Romance. Philostratus’ criticism of the tradition which identified the two groups was correct, but his alternative solution was wrong. Alexander did indeed meet a group of naked philosophers in India, but they were not the Oxydracae of the southern Indus, rather, they were the philosophers of Taxila.

Several references make this indisputable. First is the passage of Arrian cited above (n. 5) which describes the naked sophists of Taxila and their senior member Dandamis, as well as giving the story of Calanus who abandoned the sophists to travel with Alexander and eventually took his own life by fire at Susa.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Strabo follows his summary of Megasthenes’ account of the Brahmans by telling us that ‘Aristobulus says that he saw two of the sophists at Taxila, both Brachmanes; and that the elder had his head shaved but that the younger had long hair, and that both were followed by disciples.’<sup>18</sup> Strabo continues his discussion of Taxila and then introduces the testimony of Onesicritus, the Cynic writer who composed an account of Alexander’s expedition, who ‘himself was sent to converse with these sophists.’<sup>19</sup>

But by the time of Philostratus there was no hope of clarity any more about the distinction between the people Brachmanes, the caste Brachmanes and those described by the Greek term

<sup>10</sup> Str. xv 1.66.

<sup>11</sup> Str. xv 1.59.

<sup>12</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 59.8; cf. Arr. *Ind.* 11; Str. xv 1.39 (Megasthenes).

<sup>13</sup> Arr. *Anab.* vi 16.5.

<sup>14</sup> Quintus Curtius ix 4.15 calls them Sudracae; Pliny *NH* xii 6 Sydracae; Strabo xv 1.6 Hydracae. The name has been thought (McCrinkle, *AIDCW* 12 n. 1) to be reflected in the city of Uch, but the location of this city is rather far south for the data given by Arrian. Their appearance in the *Mahabharata* is at ii 52.15 (vol. ii, p. 118 in the translation by J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago 1975)).

<sup>15</sup> Philostr. *Vit.Ap.* ii.33.

<sup>16</sup> A visit of Alexander to the Ganges crept into the fabulous accounts of his travels quite early: see Craterus’ letter to his mother, *FGrH* 153F2 (= Str. xv 1.35). It became canonical in later works like the *Iter Alexandri ad Paradisum*.

<sup>17</sup> Dandamis, and Dandamis’ views on the renegade Calanus, play an important role in Palladius’ monograph.

<sup>18</sup> Str. xv 1.61.

<sup>19</sup> Str. xv 63 ff.

gymnosophists or naked philosophers. The terms have come to be interchangeable. A degree of clarity is still perceptible in, for example, Ps.-Origen's discussion of the sect of philosophers among the Brachmanes who go naked, which is generally regarded as deriving from Megasthenes;<sup>20</sup> the location of these philosophers may however be debated. But when Tertullian<sup>21</sup> states that 'we are not Brahmanes or gymnosophists,' the confusion has become total. For Palladius, the philosophers are identified as Brahmins, and they live beyond the Ganges, though in other respects they clearly derive from the group Alexander and Onesicritus met at Taxila.<sup>22</sup>

#### INDIAN OR CYNIC DOCTRINE?

The basis for all later accounts of this meeting, however much each writer may have adapted the core, is the account written by Onesicritus, which is known to us only from the summary in Strabo.<sup>23</sup> Strabo has been summarising Aristobulus' account of Taxila and its customs; he continues with the information that 'Onesicritus says that he himself was sent to converse with these sophists.' He describes them sitting naked and motionless before the city. Onesicritus conversed with one of them, Calanus, who told him that man had become arrogant as a result of the luxuries of the Golden Age, so that Zeus had appointed for men a life of toil. Another philosopher, Mandanis, accused Calanus himself of arrogance, and gave a further discourse in which he stated that 'the best teaching is that which removes pleasure and pain from the soul' (ὡς εἴη λόγος ἀριστος, ὃς ἡδονὴν καὶ λύπην ψυχῆς ἀφαιρήσεται). Onesicritus remarked that similar doctrines were taught by the Pythagoreans, as indeed did his own master Diogenes. Onesicritus went on to say that 'they inquire into numerous natural phenomena, including prognostics, rains, droughts and diseases ...; and whenever they chance upon anyone carrying figs or bunches of grapes, they get fruit from that person as a free offering; but that if it is oil, it is poured over them and they are anointed with it ...; and that they regard disease of the body as a most disgraceful thing; and that he who suspects disease in his own body commits suicide by means of fire, piling a funeral pyre; and that he anoints himself, sits down on the pyre, orders it to be lighted, and burns without a motion.' (ἔφη δ' αὐτοῦς καὶ τῶν περὶ φύσιν πολλὰ ἐξετάσαι καὶ προσημασίων, ὄμβρων, ἀνέμων, νόσων ... ὅτω δ' ἂν κομίζοντι σὺκα ἢ βότρυς παρατύχῳσι, λαμβάνειν δωρεὰν παρέχοντος. εἰ δ' ἔλαιον εἴη, καταχεῖσθαι αὐτῶν καὶ ἀλείφεσθαι ... αἰσχιστον δ' αὐτοῖς νομίζεσθαι νόσον σωματικὴν. Τὸν δ' ὑπονοήσαντα καθ' αὐτοῦ τοῦτο, ἐξαγεῖν ἑαυτὸν διὰ πυρός, νήσαντα πύραν, ὑπαλειψάμενον δὲ καὶ καθίσαντα ἐπὶ τὴν πύραν ὑφάψαι κελεύειν, ἀκίνητον δὲ καίεσθαι.)

The difficulty of communication between Onesicritus and the philosophers should not be under-estimated. He states that he used three interpreters.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to see why more than two would be involved ('Indian' to Persian, Persian to Greek), unless the philosophers themselves spoke more than one language. But in any case one can understand Onesicritus'

<sup>20</sup> Ps-Origen 24, quoted in McCrindle, *Ancient India* 120; see Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi 1961) pp. 18, 60.

<sup>21</sup> *Apol.* 42.

<sup>22</sup> The location of the Brahmins beyond the Ganges in the Far East is also found in the *Narrative of Zosimus (Ante-Nicene fathers add. vol. ii 219-24)*, who visits the land of the Brahmins where one would expect the Land of the Blessed: F. Pfister, *Kleine Schriften zum Alexanderroman* (Meisenheim am Glan 1975), 149 f.

<sup>23</sup> Str. xv 1.63-65.

<sup>24</sup> Str. xv 1.64. Cf. W.W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (2nd ed. Cambridge 1951) 429 n. 1, who suggests that the first stage was from an Indian local dialect (i.e. a Prakrit) to Sanskrit.

complaint that to 'learn anything useful would be like expecting clear water to flow through mud.' Many scholars have taken this hint and deduced that Onesicritus simply used his meeting as an excuse to compose a summary of the doctrine of the Cynic school in which he himself had been trained. Lionel Pearson's 'suspicions are aroused'<sup>25</sup> and he guesses that 'there may be some deliberate distortion.' Truesdell S. Brown<sup>26</sup> discusses this passage at length. He allows (p. 43) that Onesicritus may preserve some details of Indian ideas but argues that the speech of Calanus and the ideas of Mandanis are essentially Cynic. This view is forcefully restated by Paul Pédech,<sup>27</sup> who holds that the whole thing is a Cynic set piece: uncooked food is a Cynic practice, the researches of the naked philosophers are the same as those pursued by Cynics; and so on. The same view is taken by Beverley Berg<sup>28</sup> in her discussion of Palladius, in which she omits to make any reference at all to Indian philosophy and treats the entire encounter as a Cynic fiction. Brown also suggests that the question-and-answer session is a typical Cynic dialogue device, a view which ignores important features of the dialogue: see discussion below.

Brown, following Farrand Sayre,<sup>29</sup> also suggests that Cynic doctrine was in any case influenced initially by Indian ideas, through the intermediacy of Indian merchants visiting Sinope. Now I do not see why merchants of all people should be expected to convey ascetic ideas to the other side of Asia. It is quite possible that some Indian ideas were familiar in Greece in the fourth century BC. Pythagoras was supposed to have visited India, and Democritus was influenced by the Gymnosophists according to Diogenes Laertius.<sup>30</sup> Aristoxenus of Tarentum<sup>31</sup> has an account of a meeting between Socrates and an Indian philosopher at Athens, which might just possibly be historical. A visit of 'Magi' (probably Indian philosophers) to Athens is mentioned in Apuleius' life of Plato and by Seneca; and Pyrrho is said to have visited India and been influenced by Indian thought.<sup>32</sup> But Brown's argument is curious. He begins by stating that Onesicritus is projecting Cynic doctrine on to Indians, but then he states that Cynic doctrine is derived from India anyway. If the latter is so, Onesicritus should have no need to 'project' anything on to his Indians.

I propose to examine the hypothesis that Onesicritus' account does preserve recognisable Indian doctrine. (Discussion of the practice of suicide by fire, which in other sources is said to have been performed by Calanus himself, is discussed in *CQ* xlv (1994) 500-510). If it proves so, then we shall take a different view of its derivatives from that we should take if these accounts were inventing freely, or dilating on a Cynic theme. How far is there a genuine anthropological interest in these accounts, as distinct from a desire to make a moral or philosophical point peculiar to the authors? We shall also be able to define more accurately the distinctive additions made to the Indian core in the matters of theology, ethics and ascetic practice.

<sup>25</sup> L. Pearson, *The lost histories of Alexander the Great* (Chico, CA 1983) 99.

<sup>26</sup> T.S. Brown, *Onesicritus* (Berkeley 1949) ch. 2. On the Cynic elements in Calanus' ideas, especially his self-immolation, see my article, *CQ* xlv (1994) 500-510.

<sup>27</sup> Pédech, *op. cit.* (n. 2) 104-14.

<sup>28</sup> B. Berg, 'Dandamis: an early Christian portrait of Indian asceticism', *C&M* xxxi (1970) 269-305.

<sup>29</sup> F. Sayre, *Diogenes of Sinope* (Baltimore 1983) 40.

<sup>30</sup> D.L. ix 35.

<sup>31</sup> Aristoxenus of Tarentum fr. 53 in Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles* (Basel 1945) II p. 24; from Euseb. *praep. evang.* xi 3. 'Αθήνησι γὰρ ἐντυχεῖν Σωκράτει τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐκείνων ἓνα τινά, κάπειτα αὐτοῦ πυνθάνεσθαι τί ποιῶν φιλοσοφᾷ. τοῦ δ' εἰπόντος, ὅτι ζητῶν περὶ τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου βίου, καταγελάσαι τὸν Ἰνδόν, λέγοντα μὴ δύνασθαι τίνα τὰ ἀνθρώπων κατιδεῖν ἀγνοοῦντά γε τὰ θεῖα.

<sup>32</sup> For the Magi, Seneca *Ep.* 58.31. See E. Flintoff, 'Pyrrho and India', *Phronesis* xxv (1980), 88-108, esp. 105 n.7. Flintoff's article is an argument for strong Indian influence on the philosophy of Pyrrho.

## THE BRAHMANICAL LIFE

We should begin then by trying to define more precisely the nature of the philosophers of Taxila, using all the available evidence. The descriptions can usefully be brought face to face with the provisions of the Laws of Manu,<sup>33</sup> a compilation of Brahmanical lore and rules dating from about the turn of the era. Megasthenes' account, which has been cited already, distinguishes two sorts of philosophers: the Brahmins who advise the kings, and the Garmanes (Sramanas, ascetics), of whom the most 'honourable' (ἐντιμότεστοι) live in the forests and are known as Hylobioi.<sup>34</sup> Manu distinguishes four separate stages of the Brahmanical life: the chaste student of the Veda, the householder, the forest-dweller, and the ascetic.<sup>35</sup> The distinction of Brahmins and Sramanas seems to be supported by Nearchus (also cited by Strabo),<sup>36</sup> who states that 'the Brachmanes engage in affairs of state and attend the kings as counsellors; but that the other sophists investigate natural phenomena ... and that the modes of life for all are severe.' The key part of Megasthenes' description of the Brahmins as given by Strabo<sup>37</sup> is as follows:

The philosophers tarry in a grove in front of the city<sup>38</sup> in an enclosure merely commensurate with their needs, leading a frugal life, abstaining from animal food and the delights of love, and hearkening only to earnest words, and communicating also with anyone who wishes to hear them ... and that, for thirty-seven years, after having lived in this way they retire, each man to his own possessions, where they live more freely and under less restraint, wearing linen garments, ornaments of gold in moderation in their ears and on their hands, and partake of meats of animals ... and that they marry as many wives as possible, in order to have numerous children ... and that they converse more about death than anything else, for they believe that life here is, as it were, that of a babe still in the womb, and that death, to those who have devoted themselves to philosophy, is birth into the true life, that is, the happy life; and that they therefore discipline themselves most of all to be ready for death.

The accuracy of Megasthenes' picture of the Indian philosophers is praised by Dihle,<sup>39</sup> and indeed it seems to add up to a recognisable picture of Indian asceticism, particularly in the mention of the doctrine of *brahmacharya* or renunciation (of meat—based on non-violence, *ahimsa*—and sexual intercourse).<sup>40</sup> Some cause for concern is however given by the assertion that this way of life is pursued for exactly thirty-seven years, whereas Strabo later on attributes this practice rather to the naked Pramnae,<sup>41</sup> whom his unnamed sources explicitly contrast with the

<sup>33</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, translated by W. Doniger with B.K. Smith (Harmondsworth 1991).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Upanishad Mundaka* 1.2.11 (forest dwelling is best); *Jabala* 4. The Sanskrit term is Vanaprastha: C. Lassen, *op.cit.* in n. 3, ii (1852), 699.

<sup>35</sup> Manu vi 87. Cf. Flintoff 99 on Pyrrho's adaptation of this pattern. He cites Bhagat.

<sup>36</sup> Str. xv 1.66.

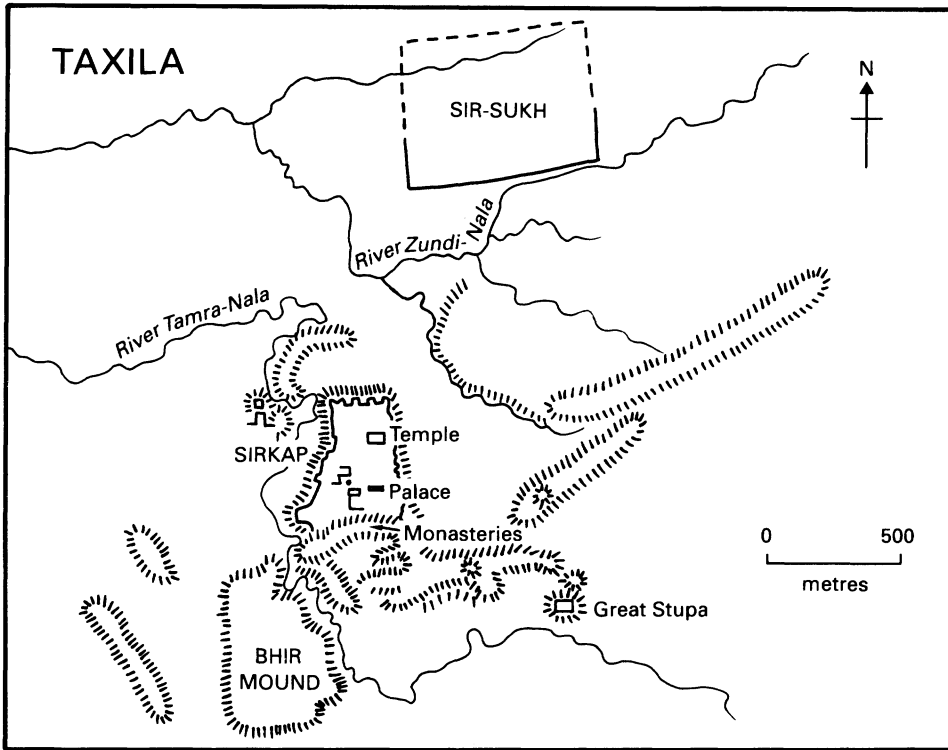
<sup>37</sup> Str. xv 1.59.

<sup>38</sup> The implication is that they may be found near any city. The same passage of Megasthenes seems to be at the root of Ps. Origen's description of 'a sect of Brahmins' who drink of the River Tagabena. Unfortunately the location of this river is undecidable. See further n. 52.

<sup>39</sup> A. Dihle, 'The conception of India in Hellenistic and Roman literature', *PCPS* n.s. x (1964), 15-23 (21). On Megasthenes see in general T.S. Brown, 'The reliability of Megasthenes', *AJP* lxxvi (1955) 18-33, and O. Stein (n. 2). For the case against Megasthenes, R.C. Majumdar, 'The Indika of Megasthenes', *JAOS* lxxvi (1958) 276.

<sup>40</sup> For a lucid account of the requirements of *brahmacharya* see e.g. M.K. Gandhi, *Autobiography* (Harmondsworth 1982), part iii, chs. 7 and 8, and *passim*.

<sup>41</sup> Str. xv 1.70. The Pramnae are the philosophic kind of Brahmins known as Pramanikas: R.K. Mookerji, *Chandragupta Maurya and his times* (Delhi etc 1943), 309 = fourth edition (1966) 189.



Brahmanes. The timing however receives remarkable corroboration from Manu,<sup>42</sup> who recommends thirty-six years study with one's guru, 'or half of that, or a quarter of that, or whenever the undertaking comes to an end.'

There is also some contradiction between total abstinence from sexual intercourse and the practice of polygamy 'in order to have as many children as possible,' a confusion which is perhaps addressed in the *Alexander Romance*, where it is asserted that the Brahmanes and their women live on opposite sides of the river and meet, infrequently, for the specific purpose of intercourse and procreation. This contradiction can be lessened by considering that the life of the Brahman falls into stages, a fact which may have been unclear to Megasthenes but is clear to us from the *Laws of Manu* (vi 87: quoted above).<sup>43</sup>

One should not overrate the reliability of Megasthenes, a writer whom Strabo criticised<sup>44</sup> for 'going beyond all bounds to the realm of myth' in speaking of people five spans and three spans long, people without nostrils, people who sleep wrapped in their own ears and people with their feet fixed on back to front. But tall stories apart, Megasthenes was a conscientious reporter and purveys much useful information about the social structure of ancient India. He did not understand all that he saw, and this has introduced distortion, for example in his account of the seven castes of India,<sup>45</sup> where the number seven is simply taken from Herodotus; the information he gives about the seven groups he describes is, however, as far as it goes, quite

<sup>42</sup> Manu iii 1. In other words thirty-seven years is a maximum for the first of the four stages of the Brahmanical life: Mookerji (*op.cit.* in preceding note) 298=185. Calanus (according to Strabo xv. 1.61, following Aristobulus) said that he could leave his ascetic life after having practised it for 'forty' years.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Manu iv 1— from life with one's guru to married life; and iii 4.

<sup>44</sup> Str. xv 1.57.

<sup>45</sup> Str. xv 1.39 and Arr. *Ind.* 11.



accurate.<sup>46</sup>

The third writer who is adduced by Strabo for his account of the philosophers of Taxila is Aristobulus,<sup>47</sup> who ‘saw two of the sophists at Taxila, both Brachmanes; and that the elder had had his head shaved but that the younger had long hair, and that both were followed by disciples; and that when not otherwise engaged they spent their time in the market place, being honoured as counsellors and being authorized to take as a gift any merchandise they wished.’ (‘Αριστόβουλος δὲ τῶν ἐν Ταξίλοις σοφιστῶν ἰδεῖν δύο φησι, Βραχμᾶνας ἀμφοτέρους, τὸν μὲν πρεσβύτερον ἐξυρημένον, τὸν δὲ νεώτερον κομήτην, ἀμφοτέροις δ’ ἀκολουθεῖν μαθητάς, τὸν μὲν οὖν ἄλλῶν χρόνον κατ’ ἀγορᾶν διατρίβειν, τιμωμένους ἀντὶ συμβούλων, ἐξουσίαν ἔχοντας, ὃ τι βούλονται τῶν ὀνίων, φέρεσθαι δωρεάν). He describes various ascetic feats performed by the philosophers for Alexander’s benefit, and continues with remarks on other curious customs of Taxila such as the marriage market, for which there is independent evidence. (The custom is called *asuravivaha* and is generally condemned in Indian law (e.g. Manu iii 51); but this did not prevent it from taking place, and it still occurs in some parts of the Himalayas).<sup>48</sup> Pearson calls Aristobulus’ account of the sophists ‘excellent and convincing’, and it is quite independent of Onesicritus. The cumulative evidence of these three writers, among whom there is no reason to suspect collusion, is that ascetics or ‘philosophers’ were indeed to be found at Taxila and became known to Alexander and his men. Taxila (Indian Takshasila) was a seat of education and learning, a ‘university city’, even before the period of Achaemenid rule, being home to the famous grammarian Panini and the political scientist Kautilya.<sup>49</sup> In later times Taxila became famous as a retreat for Buddhist monks and hermits, but no Buddhist monuments from the Greek or the succeeding Maurya period have as yet been excavated.<sup>50</sup>

The present remains show that, at its height, Taxila was a very extensive city; but when Alexander arrived there the settlement consisted solely of the Bhir Mound to the west of the river Tamra Nala, and perhaps some of the cliffs and caves to the east. The excavator of Taxila, Sir John Marshall, liked to identify this river with the river Tiberoboam which is mentioned in the Palladius text.<sup>51</sup> If so, this would be evidence that Palladius located the Brahmans at Taxila, but as we have seen he thought they lived beyond the Ganges.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> R. Thapar, *Asoka and the decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi 1973) 58. For the reliability of Megasthenes, see Mookerji (*op. cit.* in n. 41) 297-309 = 184-196; W. Halbfass, *Indien und Europa* (Basel 1981), 26-28, of which there is a revised version in *India and Europe* (Albany 1988) 13-15. Megasthenes receives the ultimate accolade of having a children’s comic devoted to his career, *Megasthenes the Greek Ambassador to India* (*Amar Chitra Katha* no. 384 (Bombay 1987).)

<sup>47</sup> Str. xv 1.61.

<sup>48</sup> J. Marshall, *A guide to Taxila* (Cambridge 1951) 19 n. 3; K. Karttunen, *India in early Greek literature* (Helsinki 1989) 223.

<sup>49</sup> A.H. Dani, *The Historic City of Taxila* (Paris 1986), 42 f; Tam, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* 136 f.

<sup>50</sup> Dani 168, *cf.* 130, stating that there are Buddhist monuments from Taxila from the third century BC, *contra* Sir John Marshall who stated that Bhir mound had Buddhist settlements as early as the sixth to fifth centuries BC.

<sup>51</sup> *Guide to Taxila* 3; Palladius *de Bragm.* ii 4. So also McCrindle, *Alexander’s invasion*, 342-3, and *Ancient India as described by classical writers*, 22, 33; B.N. Puri, *India in classical Greek writings* (Ahmedabad 1963) 30 f.

<sup>52</sup> Is there any connection of the Tamra-nala/Tiberoboam with the river Tagabena beyond which Megasthenes is said (in Ps.-Origen) to have seen a group of ascetic Brahmans? The connection is unconvincing, even if we are suspicious of McCrindle’s suggestion (*Invasion of India* 120) that the Tagabena is the modern Tunghabhadra, the Sanskrit name of which was Tungavena. If I were looking for a model for Palladius’ Tiberoboam, I might equally pick on Pliny’s Tonberum (*NH* vi 96), which was apparently near the mouth of the Indus, or the river Tamrapani in south India. The similarity of this latter name to Tambapanni, the Indian name for Ceylon, which the Greeks called Taprobane, suggests that there may, somewhere here, be a reason for the medieval location of the Brahmans in the island of Taprobane (e.g. in the *Book of Sir John Mandeville*, World’s Classics ed. p. 32). Palladius’ information on

## BRAHMAN, BUDDHIST, JAIN?

The next question we should consider is the identity of the sages met by Alexander. Some have suggested that they are Buddhists, partly on the grounds that the question-and-answer form of the encounter in the Romance and Plutarch recalls the Buddhist dialogue form;<sup>53</sup> others, notably Derrett,<sup>54</sup> take the commonsense view that what the Brahmans say to Alexander is what any Indian ascetic would say to any modern Western politician. A third view of the Brahmans, at least those described by Megasthenes (the ones who live across the river Tagabena) is that they are Jains.<sup>55</sup> The main reason for this assumption is their nudity, very characteristic of the division of Jains known as *digambaras* ('those who are clothed in air').<sup>56</sup> But nudity or near-nudity, a fruit diet and non-violence are equally appropriate to Hindu asceticism<sup>57</sup> and there is no reference to specific Jain practices such as the avoidance of pollution of the air by the breath. Suicide by starvation is a common Jain practice<sup>58</sup> which is explicitly denied to the Brahmans by Megasthenes.<sup>59</sup> Dani<sup>60</sup> points out that there is no evidence for Jain occupation at Taxila. (Their origins were in Northern Bihar, in the Ganges basin, in the sixth century BC: the teaching of their founder Mahavira spread the doctrine as far as Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal in his lifetime, and the first evidence of Jains anywhere in the Punjab is from 250 BC).<sup>61</sup>

However, the remark of Aristobulus is interesting in this connection, for he mentions having seen two sophists at Taxila, one with long hair and one with a shaven head.<sup>62</sup> The former sounds like a Hindu, the latter could well be a Buddhist. They could also in theory be Jains: Digambaras plucked out their hair, but lesser ranks allowed it to grow.<sup>63</sup> So could the Brahmans of Philostratus,<sup>64</sup> who have a monastic organisation and wear long hair and white robes. Again, these could be *Shvetambara* (white-robed) Jain temple monks,<sup>65</sup> though

the Brahmans is alleged to come from a Theban scholastikos who visited Taprobane 'where the Makrobioi live'. He does not locate the Brahmans in Taprobane, but a reader ignorant of geography might conclude that he did. But I cannot believe that there is anything to be gained for history by consideration of these names.

<sup>53</sup> Tam, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* 415, and J.D.M. Derrett in his edition of Palladius hint at such a view. See below on the implications of the dialogue form.

<sup>54</sup> J.D.M. Derrett, 'The History of 'Palladius on the Races of India and the Brahmans'', *C&M* xxi (1960), 64-135; the reference is to pages 74-76.

<sup>55</sup> Thapar, *Asoka* 60; Sayre, *Diogenes*, 42, followed by J. Sedlar, *India and the Greek world* 68 ff. Cf. also. O. Stein, *op. cit.* (n. 2) 292. The name of Jains may have been known to late classical antiquity, as Hesychius has a lemma Γέννοι· οἱ Γυμνοσφοιστάι, which in Stein's view (293) could be derived from Megasthenes.

<sup>56</sup> R.C. Craven, *Indian Art* (London 1976) 33 asserts that the philosophers Alexander met were Jains, specifically those of one of the two main sects, known as Digambaras, 'those who are clothed in air'. Cf. P. Dundas, *The Jains* (London 1992) 40-8, esp. 42.

<sup>57</sup> Nudity: e.g. Rig Veda hymn 10.136.

<sup>58</sup> A.C. Bouquet, *Hinduism* (2nd ed. London 1962) 64; Dundas, *The Jains*, 155. It seems however to be implied by Archelaus *FGrH* 123F1 (ap. Solinus lii 18-23), who describes an Indian race who go naked, live on vegetables (but also fish) and whose sick creep away to die. However, they also eat the flesh of dead relatives, which casts doubt on the value of this testimony.

<sup>59</sup> Str. xv 1.68. Megasthenes shows knowledge of Jain doctrines according to O. Stein, *op. cit.* (n. 2) 294.

<sup>60</sup> Dani 93.

<sup>61</sup> A.K. Chatterjee, *A comprehensive history of Jainism* (Calcutta 1978) i 17-43.

<sup>62</sup> Str. xv 1.61.

<sup>63</sup> Dundas, *The Jains* 134. Bardaisan ap. Stob. *Phys.* i 54 mentions the shaving of bodies. (Translation in McCrindle, *Ancient India as described in classical literature*, 167-9).

<sup>64</sup> G. Anderson, *Philostratus* (Beckenham 1986), 210. The Samanaioi of Bardaisan (cited in Porphyry, *de Abst.* iv 18) have a monastic organization but do practise suicide by fire. Curiouser and curiouser...

<sup>65</sup> Dundas, *The Jains* 104.

Shvetambara tradition attributes the earliest appearance of such to the fourth century CE. Philostratus' Brahmins also levitate and use no fire, and wear gold rings: all these features are attributed to the Brahmin by Manu (the gold ring being worn in the ear).<sup>66</sup>

There are some slight suggestions of a knowledge of Buddhist doctrine in the remarks of Megasthenes, notably his description of the philosophers' view of life as a 'dream-like illusion', which Thapar sees as a reference to the Buddhist doctrine of Maya.<sup>67</sup> But such a view is by no means confined to Buddhism among Indian philosophies. However, Clement of Alexandria,<sup>68</sup> after citing Megasthenes' account of the Brachmanae and the Sarmanae, 'who are called Hylobioi', goes on to say 'among the Indians (εἰσὶ δὲ τῶν Ἰνδῶν) are those philosophers also who follow the precepts of Boutta, whom they honour as a god on account of his extraordinary sanctity'. An alternative reading of this passage would identify the Hylobioi with the followers of Boutta,<sup>69</sup> but Clement calls the Brahmins and Sarmanai a διττὸν γένος of philosophers, suggesting that the Buddhists are extra to these. Besides the sramanas Clement a few lines earlier mentions the *Samanaioi* whom Dihle<sup>70</sup> takes to be Buddhists: sramanas, Dihle says, were not 'or not necessarily' Buddhists. But the references to Samanaioi and Buddhists are widely separated and need not be brought into conjunction. This seems to be the only reference to the Buddha in Greek literature, and I think this may be taken as an indication that Buddhist doctrine was not familiar, at least as being Buddhist, to Greeks.<sup>71</sup> This reference to Buddha probably

<sup>66</sup> Laws of Manu iv 36.

<sup>67</sup> Thapar *Asoka* 59.

<sup>68</sup> Clem. *Strom.* i 15. 71.3-6. P. 359 P (= Megasthenes fr. 43 in McCrindle, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian*): Φιλοσοφία τοίνυν πολυωφέλης τι χρήμα πάλαι μὲν ἤκμασε παρὰ βαρβάρους κατὰ τὰ ἔθνη διαλάμψασα, ὕστερον δὲ καὶ εἰς Ἑλληνας κατήλθεν. προσέστησαν δ' αὐτῆς Αἰγυπτίων τε οἱ προφήται καὶ Ἀσσυρίων οἱ Χαλδαῖοι καὶ Γαλάτων οἱ Δρυῖδαι καὶ Σαμαναῖοι Βάκτρων καὶ Κέλτων οἱ φιλοσοφῆσαντες καὶ Περσῶν οἱ Μάγοι (οἱ μαγεῖα καὶ τοῦ Σωτήρος προεμήνυσαν τὴν γένεσιν, ἄσπερος αὐτοῖς καθηγουμένοι εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν ἀφικνούμενοι γῆν) Ἰνδῶν τε οἱ γυμνοσοφισταί, ἄλλοι γὰρ φιλόσοφοι βάρβαροι. διττὸν δὲ τούτων τὸ γένος, οἱ μὲν Σαρμάναι αὐτῶν, οἱ δὲ Βραχμάναι καλούμενοι. καὶ τῶν Σαρμάνων οἱ ὑλόβιοι προσαγορευόμενοι οὔτε πόλεις οἰκοῦσιν οὔτε στέγας ἔχουσιν, δένδρων δὲ ἀμφιέννυνται φλοιοῖς καὶ ἀκρόδρυα σιτοῦνται καὶ ὕδωρ ταῖς χερσὶ πίνουσιν, οὐ γάμον, οὐ παιδοποιεῖν ἴσασιν, ὥσπερ οἱ νῦν Ἐγκρατῆται καλούμενοι. εἰσὶ δὲ τῶν Ἰνδῶν οἱ τοῖς Βούττα πειθόμενοι παραγγέλμασιν, ὃν δι' ὑπερβολὴν σεμνότητος ὡς θεὸν τετιμῆκασιν.

<sup>69</sup> McCrindle, *Ancient India as described by classical writers*, p. 65.

<sup>70</sup> Dihle 22. McCrindle 98 confidently takes the sramanas to be Buddhists. D.M. Lang, *Wisdom of Balahvar* (London 1957) 24 says that classical sources 'refer to Buddhists .. as Samanians'.

<sup>71</sup> Buddhism as a doctrine must have been known to Greeks dwelling in the land of its origin, at least if any of them troubled to read the two Greek-language inscribed edicts of King Asoka (third century BC) announcing his conversion to Buddhist practice: see D. Schlumberger *et al.*, 'Une bilingue gréco-araméenne d'Asoka', *Journal Asiatique* cxxlvi (1958) 1 and D. Schlumberger, 'Une nouvelle inscription grecque d'Asoka', *Journal Asiatique* cclii (1964) 137; these items have entered scholarly discussion in W. Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany 1988) 19 and 457 n. 98, and S. Sherwin-White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis* (London 1993) 101-2, both with further bibliography. But this would not necessarily make even local Greeks any clearer about the difference of Buddhist and other forms of asceticism. The name of Buddha does appear on a coin of the Kushan king Kanishka (late 1st-early 2nd c. CE) with a representation of the Buddha inscribed in Greek ΒΟΔΔ (reproduced in R.C. Craven, *Indian Art* (London 1975) 85). Thereafter the Buddha appears in classical texts from time to time. Jerome *adv. Jovin.* I writes that the gymnosophists have the doctrine of the birth of Buddha from the side of a (virgin) mother. One does encounter statements such as that 'the classical world would have become acquainted with the Buddhist religion at the time of Alexander the Great's expedition to India', (D.M. Lang, *loc.cit.*). Lang goes on to say that Buddhist teachings were absorbed by Gnostic philosophers including the Elkesaites from whom Mani sprang. Bardaisan acquired information on Buddhism from Indian ambassadors to Elagabalus, according to Porphyry *De Styge* ap. Stob. i 3.56 9144) ff; see G. Anderson, *Philostratus* (Beckenham 1986) 209. But in the *Book of the Laws of Countries* he describes only Brahmins, who abstain from idolatry, sexual intercourse, meat and wine. (W. Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum* (1855) 17). In an unnamed work by Bardaisan quoted by Jerome (*adv. Jovin.* 2.14), *Bardaisanes, vir Babylonius, in duo dogmata apud Indos gymnosophistas dividit: quorum alterum appellat Brachmanas; alterum Samanaeos*. These too live by the Ganges. Bardaisan got his information probably from Indian ambassadors to the emperor Elagabalus: see H.J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen 1966) 175, 218.

derives from Megasthenes,<sup>72</sup> but, as with the Jains, the information given about them is minimal. I decline to detect Buddhist elements in the encounter.

What does seem fairly clear is that Greeks would not readily have distinguished different grades or types of Indian ascetic. For Greek purposes any of these could be called philosophers, or Brahmins. The fact that there could also be philosophers or ascetics who were not Brahmins—referred to comprehensively in the inscriptions of King Asoka as *brahmanasramanam*<sup>73</sup>—was surely beyond them.

The point may be pressed further. Indian philosophies in the fifth and fourth centuries BC belonged to a fluid category: there were not just three systems, but a continuum.<sup>74</sup> B.N. Puri<sup>75</sup> stresses the numerousness of the ascetic orders (sixty-two of them; 363 among the Jains) and points out that this asceticism goes back to Rigvedic times: it becomes a system with life stages only in the Smritis or Sutras of post-Buddhist times. Similarly the Jains only separated into clearly defined sects in the fourth century CE.<sup>76</sup> The Greek sources may reflect this fluidity, so that it is inappropriate to press them for adherence to a system established only later.

Aristobulus refers to the remarkable endurance of the ascetics of Taxila, one of whom ‘stood on one leg holding aloft in both hands a log about three cubits in length, and when one leg tired he changed the support to the other and kept this up all day long’. We can all recognise this description of what used to be called a fakir:<sup>77</sup> it echoes closely some of the prescriptions for ascetic practices in the Laws of Manu (vi ff.) e.g the practice of standing for long periods on tiptoe (ib 22)— a practice also accepted by Jains.<sup>78</sup>

#### THE DIALOGUE: INDIAN OR CYNIC?

A further question is whether the dialogue of Alexander and the leader of the Brahmins, Dandamis, and the question-and-answer session, are directly derived from Indian philosophy. These passages may reflect a typically Buddhist form of writing. The form of this encounter has been compared with the favoured form of Buddhist instruction, the dialogue.<sup>79</sup> One example mentioned by Tarn is the Samannaphala Sutta, in which the king Ajatasattu asks one question, which no sage has been able to answer, and the Buddha gives him a long reply. A characteristic of such encounters, as Tarn points out, is that in them the king really wants to know the answer; he is not testing the sages. As in the dialogues of Plato, the dialogue form is ‘merely an agreeable piece of machinery for eliciting the opinions of Buddha or Socrates’. The original, perhaps, is the encounter of Prince Gautama himself with a wandering sage whom he questions closely on his purpose in becoming a wanderer; he receives the reply, ‘Oh prince, I became a wanderer for the sake of winning self-control, calm and utter release’.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>72</sup> O. Stein (n. 2) 290.

<sup>73</sup> Dihle (n. 3) 21.

<sup>74</sup> Flintoff (n. 32) 100 f.

<sup>75</sup> B.N. Puri (n. 3 (1939)) 29; cf. R.K. Mookerji (n. 4) 304=189.

<sup>76</sup> Dundas, *The Jains* 104. Maybe even later: W. Schübring, *The doctrine of the Jains* (Delhi etc 1962), 50-51.

<sup>77</sup> OED: ‘properly an indigent person [[Arabic *faqir*], but specially applied to a Mahomedan (*sic*) religious mendicant, and then loosely and inaccurately to Hindu devotees and naked ascetics.’

<sup>78</sup> Dundas, *The Jains* 146.

<sup>79</sup> Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* 414-36.

<sup>80</sup> Fourth Omen in Mahavastu tr. J.J. Jones; cited from D.M. Lang, *The Wisdom of Balahvar* 15-16. This encounter is the basis also of Josaphat’s encounter with the monk Barlaam in the *Romance of Barlaam and Josaphat* attributed to John Damascene. However, there is no reason to believe that the story of Barlaam and Josaphat reached Greek ears before the 10th-11th century AD. (St John Damascene (Loeb edition) introd. by D.M. Lang, xxxvi ff). One may note that the testing of the false Barlaam by the king’s picked sages is an important episode in *Barlaam*

The best known example is the long work known as *The Questions of Milinda or Milindapanha*.<sup>81</sup> Milinda is the Bactrian Greek king Menander (155-130 BC), and the work consists of a series of questions put by him to the Buddhist sage Nagasena; in this Milinda (Menander) 'harasses the brethren by putting puzzles to them of heretical tendency'<sup>82</sup> (it is quite likely that Menander was in reality a convert to Buddhism). Tarn<sup>83</sup> thought that the *Milindapanha* was influenced by the episode in the Alexander Romance, and that a Greek version of the *Milindapanha* further influenced the set of ten questions put by Ptolemy to the Jewish sages in the *Letter of Aristeas*. A reverse direction of influence was proposed by Merkelbach.<sup>84</sup> However, J.D.M. Derrett<sup>85</sup> has recently argued again that the question-and-answer session in the Alexander Romance influenced the *Milindapanha*, which he dates to ca. AD 150.

The parallels adduced by Derrett make clear that there is nothing exclusively Buddhist about the form of this encounter. Question-and-answer sessions—which one may call dialogues of a kind—are a common form of doctrinal instruction in Indian literature generally, going back as far as the *Mahabharata*, the conversation of Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-gita*, and the expositions in some of the Upanishads.<sup>86</sup> The form is the basis also of the *Fables of Pilpay*, another Indian work this time without doctrinal elements: its stories are the answers given by a sage to a king's request for advice.

The form became canonical for meetings with Brahmins, as in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* (iii 18 f., 34). Question-and-answer was also a Pythagorean form of instruction,<sup>87</sup> and question-and-answer sessions became a kind of party game in Greek intellectual circles. Diodorus Siculus<sup>88</sup> has the Seven Sages at the court of Croesus participate in a quiz; and one may think also of Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Sages*.

The actual questions put do not seem to reflect the interests of Indian philosophy. Rather, several of them reflect the particular situation of Alexander in the Romance. They include one chestnut, 'Who are more numerous, the living or the dead?'—which seems to have been a conundrum regularly put to Greek philosophers, as it was to Anacharsis in the sixth century BC.<sup>89</sup> (Anacharsis' reply was an oblique one: 'In which class do you put those who travel on the sea?'). Other posers are of the kind, 'Which is greater, the earth or the sea?' More telling in the context is the question, 'Which is the wickedest of all creatures?', to which the answer is 'Man ... learn from yourself the answer to that. You are a wild beast, and see how many other

and Josaphat, with death as the penalty for losing; another king-and-philosopher conflict.

<sup>81</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda* (London 1890-94).

<sup>82</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids, *Sacred Books of the East* (London 1890-94) xxxv-xxxvi; Tarn, *loc.cit.*; D.M. Lang, *Wisdom of Balahvar* 151-6.

<sup>83</sup> Tarn, *loc.cit.*

<sup>84</sup> R. Merkelbach, *Die Quellen des griechischen Alexanderromans*<sup>2</sup> (Munich 1977).

<sup>85</sup> J.D.M. Derrett, 'Greece and India: the Milindapanha, the Alexander-romance and the Gospels,' *Zschr. f. Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* xix (1967) 33-64.

<sup>86</sup> *Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad* is a good example (pp. 127-32 in the Penguin selection). M.L. West, *Early Greek philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford 1971) 201, rightly castigates classical scholars for being 'frightened of Upanishads'.

<sup>87</sup> Iamblichus *Vit. Pyth.* 82.

<sup>88</sup> D. S. ix 26.

<sup>89</sup> D. L. i 103-4. Another poser put to Anacharsis was 'What among men is both good and bad?' 'The tongue'. (This occurs also in *Vit. Aesopi* 51-55). Anacharsis also praised a life according to nature, according to *Ep.* 9 in the supposititious collection (p. 48.29 f. in A. Malherbe's edition). On the letters of Anacharsis see also F.H. Reuters, *Die Briefe des Anacharsis* (Berlin 1963). The collection belongs to early Hellenistic times: J.F. Kindstrand, *Anacharsis: the legend and the Apophthegmata* (Uppsala 1981), 63 f.

wild beasts you have with you, to help you tear away the lives of other beasts'. Curiously, Alexander is not angry here, but smiles. Next comes the question, 'What is kingship?' to which the answer is 'Unjust power ... insolence supported by opportunity; a golden burden'.

After the question-and-answer session is concluded, the philosophers turn the tables on Alexander by asking him for immortality. He replies with what we might call his 'position statement', about the force that drives him on to conquest. The desire for immortality belongs in the Romance to Alexander, and is the very antithesis of everything we know to be the object of striving in Indian philosophy. This element cannot derive from an Indian source.

The question-and-answer session is not exclusive to the Alexander Romance. It recurs in a closely similar form (nine questions) in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*,<sup>90</sup> and a near-doublet of Plutarch's series of questions is preserved as an independent text of uncertain date: it lacks Plutarch's dénouement.<sup>91</sup> The story was plainly circulating quite early as it also appears on a papyrus of ca. 100 BC.<sup>92</sup> In all these versions Alexander takes up a bullying stance towards the philosophers. In Plutarch, Alexander captures ten of the philosophers who had incited Sabbas (i.e. Sambus)<sup>93</sup> to revolt, and decides to test their famed ability to answer questions in aphorisms.

He had previously announced that he would put to death the first man who gave a wrong answer, and then the rest in order according to their performance, and he ordered one of them, the eldest, to act as judge in the contest.

Several of the questions are the same as in the Romance; others are notably 'clever', e.g. 'Which is the most cunning of animals?'—'That which has not yet been discovered'. The questions do not relate directly to Alexander's situation, though one relates to kingship ('How can a man make himself beloved?')<sup>94</sup> and another is 'How can a man become a god?'<sup>95</sup>

At the end of the quiz, the judge gives his answer, 'that each of them had answered worse than the one before'.

'In that case', Alexander replied, 'you shall be executed first yourself for having given such a verdict'. 'That is not right, your majesty', returned the judge, 'unless you did not mean what you said when you announced that you would put to death first the man who gave the worst answer.'

In Plutarch Alexander then gives the philosophers gifts and Plutarch continues with the sending of Onesicritus to converse with 'those philosophers who enjoyed the highest reputation' and with the account of Calanus and Dandamis.

<sup>90</sup> Plut. *Alexander* 64. The questions vary slightly in all the versions: e.g. Julius Valerius iii 12, 'To whom may a man not lie?—God'.

<sup>91</sup> Boissonade, *Anecdota Graeca* i 45-6 (codex regius Paris. 1630), containing several collections of aphorisms and wisdom texts. The date of this text is unknown; it could as well be an excerpt from Plutarch as a forerunner.

<sup>92</sup> *PBerol* 13044 of c. 100 BC (= *FGrH* 153.9); ed. U. Wilcken, 'Alexander der Grosse und die indischen Gymnosophisten', *SB Berlin* 1923, 161 ff. This story also influenced the Jewish accounts of Alexander's encounter with the sages of the South: see L. Wallach, 'Alexander the Great and the Indian Gymnosophists in Hebrew tradition', *Proc. Amer. Acad. Jewish Research* xi (1941) 47-83; I. Kazis (ed.), *The Book of the Gestes of Alexander of Macedon* (Cambridge MA 1962).

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Arr. *Anab.* vi 16.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander is again the addressee of a discourse on kingship in Dio Chrysostom, *On Kingship*; on which see C.P. Jones, *The Roman world of Dio Chrysostom* (Cambridge, Mass. 1978) 116-9.

<sup>95</sup> It is possible that India turned Alexander's head. Recognised as a son of Dionysus in Nysa (*QCR* viii 10.1) he began to see himself as a god from now onwards: P. Goukowsky, *Essai sur les origines de la légende d'Alexandre* (Paris 1978). However he may have appeared to the Nysaeans, this was not a view that could commend itself to the Hindu Brahmans. His claim to divinity became more aggressive after the death of Hephaestion (who does not feature in the Romance); the Romance situates his claim in the context of his penetration of the furthest east.

The form of the encounter requires consideration. It takes the form of what the folklorists call a *Halsrätsel*, a riddle (or series of riddles) which, if the answerer fails to answer correctly, his life is forfeit. Merkelbach, citing *Milindapanha* 2.1.3, regards the idea that a sage who answers incorrectly will be punished as an Indian one.<sup>96</sup> Derrett finds parallels for the form in Indian literature, where it is called *Yaksa-prasna*, but weakens the case by observing that it also occurs in other oriental texts, notably the Story of Ahikar.<sup>97</sup> In fact it is a common motif in folklore.<sup>98</sup>

But in the Alexander Romance the riddle is given a particular twist by being embedded in a form of the Liar paradox. Such paradoxes were of particular interest to the Megarian philosophers,<sup>99</sup> who had close links with the Cynics.<sup>100</sup> Eubulides<sup>101</sup> wrote a number of dialectical arguments including the Liar (surely a form of the paradox in our story), Sorites, the Hooded Man and others. Cynics and Megarians did not always see eye-to-eye: Crates (fr. 1-2) was irritated by Megarian 'timewasting in the verbal pursuit of virtue', and Timon attacked the Megarian Euclides<sup>102</sup> for λύσσαν ἐρισμοῦ, a criticism echoed by a comic poet's reference to ψευδαλαζόσιν. Stilpo was famed for his frigid quibbling, which seems to have had an Eleatic quality in its concern for questions of identity.<sup>103</sup> Epicurus also objected to their obsession with linguistic puzzles,<sup>104</sup> which at least must have had the Cynic-like effect of annoying people.

These examples suggest that the specific form of the encounter could easily have been developed on a folk-tale basis in Greek philosophical circles.

It should be noted that both forms of the encounter are incompatible with the statement of Onesicritus himself,<sup>105</sup> that he visited the philosophers on Alexander's behalf, and conversed with them. It would appear therefore that we are dealing here with a free-floating text, elaborated on the basis of knowledge of Alexander's visit to the gymnosophists, but not based on any actual document describing that visit.<sup>106</sup> We can conclude nothing from it about Greek knowledge of Indian philosophy, and there is no reason to connect it with Onesicritus.

Against this last point we should note the argument of T.S. Brown that both versions of the encounter are of Cynic derivation, the Berlin papyrus representing a Cynic view of Alexander which is hostile to the king, while Plutarch's is a Cynic view which is nevertheless favourable to the king. Brown<sup>107</sup> proposes that Plutarch's version therefore derives from Onesicritus, an illegitimate step. But is there anything distinctively Cynic about the story?

<sup>96</sup> R. Merkelbach, *Die Quellen des griechischen Alexanderromans*<sup>2</sup> (Munich 1977) 74.

<sup>97</sup> Derrett (n. 84).

<sup>98</sup> H. van Thiel, 'Alexanders Gespräch mit den Gymnosophisten', *Hermes* c (1972) 343-59; J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens* (London 1970) ch. 6.

<sup>99</sup> van Thiel *op. cit.*

<sup>100</sup> D.R. Dudley, *History of Cynicism* (London 1937) 95.

<sup>101</sup> D. L. ii 108.

<sup>102</sup> D. L. ii 106 ff.

<sup>103</sup> D. L. ii 113-20, esp. 119, the Vegetable Puzzle; RE s.v. Megarikoi. Diodorus Cronus denied ambiguity: Aul. Gell. ii 2.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Lucian *Vitarum auctio* 22. A.A. Long, *BICS* xviii (1971) 26; also Long, *Hellenistic philosophy* (London 1974) index s.v. 'Megarians'.

<sup>105</sup> Str. xv 1.63.

<sup>106</sup> It is not impossible that the Alexander Romance influenced the *Milindapanha*, as Derrett suggests; but I would disagree with his suggestion that Anantakaya in the *Milindapanha* could be identified with Onesicritus, who has no part in this story. Hamilton in his commentary on Plutarch's Alexander *ad loc.* (p. 179) regards the entire encounter as unhistorical.

<sup>107</sup> T.S. Brown, *Onesicritus* (Berkeley 1949) 47-8.

Another story pattern can be discerned at work in this episode, that of the encounter of a single sage with a king whom he outwits. The story pattern goes back to the legend of Ahikar,<sup>108</sup> and is found in Esther and Greek Esther (and Daniel),<sup>109</sup> in the *Life of Aesop*,<sup>110</sup> and in the *Life of Secundus the Silent Philosopher*.<sup>111</sup> Though the earlier works have no obvious Cynic connections (though Brown sees in Aesop a Cynic story), the last work is particularly significant. Secundus is a follower of the Cynic discipline whose contempt for the world is evinced in his refusal to speak. He is brought to the Emperor Hadrian who sets him a series of twenty questions, threatening to cut off his head if he does not reply. Secundus answers them in writing. This series of definition-questions, answered by kennings, bears a remarkable similarity to the questions in the Alexander Romance, though the nearness is not sufficient to suggest any direct influence. One of the questions (no. 16: 88.5) is the same as one of ours: 'What is wealth?—a golden burden'. In addition Secundus, like the Brahmans, laughs at Hadrian's pretensions, stating that the Emperor 'has no power over him other than death' (74.17 ff.).

#### CONCLUSION

There seems then to be a *prima facie* case for supposing that the detailed content of this episode originated in Greek philosophical circles. It represents an encounter of a type beloved of Cynic writers, and it incorporates a paradox of a kind that fascinated the Megarian philosophers. But it cannot derive from Onesicritus' account of his meeting with the Brahmans, since in that account he went as Alexander's proxy and Alexander did not meet the philosophers. Perhaps Onesicritus was inspired by his meeting to work up a separate fictionalised version which included his favourite philosophical themes. Or perhaps his reports of the Brahmans set the theme circulating among Cynic groups and the work originated in one of these. This seems as much as we can say. But this does not mean that we need doubt either the historicity of the meeting or the information given by Onesicritus (and hence the Alexander Romance) about the Brahmans' way of life: the argument has served both to support the veracity of Onesicritus and the other Alexander-historians concerning the Brahmans, and to show that the episode in the Alexander Romance derives nothing but commonplaces about the Brahmans from their descriptions, and tells us nothing new about Greek knowledge of India.

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<sup>108</sup> J. Conybeare, R. Harris and H. Lewis *The Story of Ahikar* (Cambridge 1898).

<sup>109</sup> L.M. Wills, *The Jew in the court of the foreign king* (Minneapolis 1990).

<sup>110</sup> B.E. Perry, *Aesopica* (Urbana 1952). The story-pattern became entrenched in Greek literature, and reappears strikingly in Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Sages* (153a ff.) suggesting that the motif may well be grounded in Greek folklore. Curiously it is introduced in the text by a request from Amasis, Pharaoh of Egypt, to Bias for assistance in a contest of wits with the king of the Ethiopians, a situation recalling the contest of Nectanebo and Esarhaddon in the tale of Ahikar which provided the basis for an episode in the *Life of Aesop*.

<sup>111</sup> B.E. Perry, *The Life of Secundus the Philosopher* (Ithaca 1964).