THE MELAMMU PROJECT

http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/

“The Naked Ascetics of India and Other Eastern Religions in the Greek and Roman Sources of the Late Classical Antiquity”

KLAUS KARTTUNEN

Published in Melammu Symposia 3:

A. Panaino and G. Pettinato (eds.),

Ideologies as Intercultural Phenomena.
Publisher: http://www.mimesisedizioni.it/

This article was downloaded from the website of the Melammu Project:
http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/

The Melammu Project investigates the continuity, transformation and diffusion of Mesopotamian culture throughout the ancient world. A central objective of the project is to create an electronic database collecting the relevant textual, art-historical, archaeological, ethnographic and linguistic evidence, which is available on the website, alongside bibliographies of relevant themes. In addition, the project organizes symposia focusing on different aspects of cultural continuity and evolution in the ancient world.

The Digital Library available at the website of the Melammu Project contains articles from the Melammu Symposia volumes, as well as related essays. All downloads at this website are freely available for personal, non-commercial use. Commercial use is strictly prohibited. For inquiries, please contact melammu-db@helsinki.fi.
peculiar outcome of Alexander’s Indian campaigns was the persistent fame of India as the land of wisdom. In the spring of 326, during his stay in Taxila (now on the outskirts of Islamabad in Pakistan), Alexander and his men met naked ascetics, who soon became known as the Gymnosophistai. There are several different first-hand accounts of this meeting. It is sufficient here to mention Aristobulus, Nearch, and Onesicritus. The story goes on, as one of these ascetics, Calanus, consented to join Alexander’s entourage and followed him to Susa, where he, falling ill, committed a spectacular suicide by burning himself at the stake, witnessed by the whole army. The reasons for this suicide were never completely understood in the West, but the calmness and determination of Calanus left a lasting impression.

In addition to these Gymnosophistai or naked sophists, Alexander also met Brahmins living by the lower Indus, where he had to fight hard to suppress their resistance. A generation later, Megasthenes, the Seleucid envoy to the Indian Maurya empire, gave his own view of the Gymnosophistai and described several kinds of Indian ascetics and sectarians (such as the Pramnai and Gymnetes) he had seen.

The main account of the doctrines of the Gymnosophists was given by Onesicritus (in Strabo 15, 1, 63-65). It is, however, suspiciously close to his own Greek philosophy of the Cynical school. Even if he did not intentionally distort his account, Onesicritus had to rely on several interpreters and could hardly have had an in-depth interview. It was not the doctrines of the Gymnosophists, but their severe ascetism, described by the participants of the campaign, and the voluntary death in a fire, committed by one of them, that made such an enormous impression on the Greeks and the Romans after them. They became a literary commonplace. References to these Gymnosophists and to their asceticism are frequent especially in the literature of Roman Imperial period.

According to Josephus (Bellum

---

1 The research made for this article was financed by the Academy of Finland. Margot Stout Whiting has kindly checked my English.
2 As I have often pointed out, the so-called Indian wise men of Herodotus (3, 100f., cf. Pomponius Mela 3, 64) are not ascetics, but a primitive tribe described exactly according to Herodotus’ ideas of primitivity. See e.g. Karttunen 1997b.
3 They have somewhat puzzled modern scholars, too. In Indian tradition such a suicide is not common, though not entirely unheard of.
4 I have here briefly summarized what was fully analysed in Karttunen 1997a, 55ff. There it is also explained how the word Gymnosophist, not yet used in the earliest accounts, became the standard designation.
5 Often they were mentioned in comparisons or as embellishment in works completely unrelated with India. See e.g. Cicero, Tusc. disp. 2, 17, 40; 2, 22, 52; 5, 27, 77f.; Lucanus 3, 240f.
Jud. 7, 351-357), Eleazar exhorted his troops in the Jewish war of 66–70 A.D. to be as willing to die as the Indians who commit their bodies to fire. Around 200 A.D. Clement of Alexandria (Stromateis 4, 7, 17, 3) compared the Brahmins’ calmness facing the death by fire to the true Christians’ attitude towards martyrdom.

The description of the Indian Gymnosophists had already received some Cynic colouration at the hands of Onesicritus and soon the Cynics, and the Stoics as their heirs, suited it to their own needs. In the legendary versions of Alexander’s history, the naked ascetics of Taxila as well as the rebellious Brahmins of the southern Indus country had an important place. Onesicritus was here left aside as a secondary person, and all talks were described as taking place directly between Alexander and the Brahmins.\(^5\) This is often contaminated with a later episode in Alexander’s history: His meeting with the warlike Brahmins of the lower Indus country and the questions Alexander put to them.\(^6\) Tradition also portrayed Alexander as a great writer of letters, and there soon arose a fictitious correspondence between him and the Brahmins, too.\(^7\) In these later traditions Dandamis (in Latin corrupted into Dindimus), the head of the Taxilian Gymnosophists who had refused to follow Alexander, often emerges as the central figure.

We see that the conception of India as a land of wisdom and philosophy was formed during the Indian campaigns of Alexander and soon it became a part of the canonized conception of India. Until Late Antiquity this conception was completely dominated by the histories of Alexander and Megasthenes. Indian philosophers were continuously admired because of their ascetic lifestyle, but little (if anything) was known of their philosophy. A critical voice was rare, though Aelianus (V.H. 2, 31) proudly claimed that barbarous sages were not as wise as Greeks and Plutarch (De sollertione animalium 23, 975D) disparaged Egyptian fables and unattested tales of Indians and Libyans as unreliable. Occasional new contacts with Indian wise men were interpreted according to this tradition, which continued into the Middle Ages and beyond.

The first of these new contacts is found in Nicolaus Damascenus’ account\(^8\) of the Indian embassy to Augustus and of its member, Zarnanochegas, who burnt himself in Athens and thus revived the fame of Calanus. Some new information about Indian wise men can be found in authors such as Alexander Polyhistor, Dio Chrysostomus, and Bardesanes.\(^9\) In the fourth century, the Theban Scholasticius put together an account of his own voyage to India and different traditions of the Brahmins.\(^10\)

Indian wise men were famous, but the idea of seeking wisdom in India remained more or less literary. There were...

\(^5\) The earliest version of this fictitious meeting is found in a philosophical Papyrus (Geneva Pap.), the full text as part 2 of Pseudo-Palladius. See e.g. Hansen 1965.

\(^6\) The questions first in Plutarch, Alexander 64 and in a Berlin Papyrus, first edited by Wilcken 1923, then e.g. Pseudo-Callisthenes 3, 6.

\(^7\) The Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo in several versions (see e.g. Cary 1954 and Gregor 1964, 36ff.). On a Letter of Calanus to Alexander see Philo of Alexandria, Quod omnis probus liber sit 93ff. (cf. Devine 1988) and Ambrosius, Epist. 37, 34ff.

\(^8\) F 100 in Strabo 15, 1, 73; also mentioned by Dio Cassius 54, 9. See e.g. Przyluski 1934.

\(^9\) Alexander Polyh. F 18 (Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis 3, 6, 60, 1–4), Dio Chr. 33, 18ff. & 49, 7; Bardesanes, fragments in FGrH 719.

\(^10\) This famous account was preserved among the works of the church historian Palladius.
late apocryphical stories about the Indian travels of some early Greek philosophers (see below) and some had actually joined Alexander’s entourage.\textsuperscript{11} Lucian tells of Peregrinus Proteus, the Greek charlatan, who emulated the Gymnosophists and burned himself at Olympia in 167 A.D.\textsuperscript{12} If we are to trust Philostratus, Apollonius of Tyana actually went to India in the first century and studied among Brahmins. As a literary motif we meet in Lucian (\textit{Toxaris} 34) a man who gave away his money and went away to India to join the Brahmins. Little is known of Hierocles, the consul of Bithynia around 300 A.D. and an anti-Christian polemist, who claimed to have visited the naked ascetics of India.\textsuperscript{13} A certain Metrodorus is mentioned as a pupil of the Brahmins.\textsuperscript{14}

Porphyrius (\textit{Vita Plotini} 3) tells us that Plotinus actually wanted to go to India in order to study Indian philosophy, but was prevented by the war between Rome and Iran. However, it is somewhat disappointing that often when we find a good story and are inclined to take it as such, it happens that when we delve still deeper into classical literature, we find an earlier literary parallel to it. Thus the account of Plotinus’ plans is suspiciously similar to Apuleius’ (\textit{De Platonе 1, 3})

claim that the Asian wars prevented Plato from going to Persia and India. As the founder hero of the Neo-Platonists, Plotinus was supposed to imitate Plato.\textsuperscript{15} I have no idea where a fifth century author such as Claudianus Mamertus (\textit{Epist. ad Sapaudum} 2) got the idea that Plato actually visited the Bragmanae.\textsuperscript{16}

India had the established fame of the land of wisdom and the tradition was transmitted to the Middle Ages. In Christian literature, however, Indian ascetics got new roles. We see, for instance, the virtuous ascetics (and thus somehow akin to Christian ascetics) teaching moral values to the warrior Alexander.\textsuperscript{17} There was also an opposite approach that was concerned with the ideal of chivalry and here Alexander is given the last word.\textsuperscript{18} At the same time missionaries and other travellers were able to bring back some fresh information. Now came, for instance, the first clear accounts of Buddhism.\textsuperscript{19}

In their approach to the religions and philosophies of the world, the early Christian authors had a triple scheme, consisting of the Jewish-Christian tradition, the Greek tradition, and the Oriental tradition. In the latter, doctrines such as those of Egypt, Mesopotamia (Chaldaea), Iran (the Magi), and India were lumped

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} Pyrrho and Anaxarchus, according to Diogenes Laërtius 9, 11, 61.
\textsuperscript{12} Lucian, \textit{De morte Peregrini}, briefly also in Philostratus, \textit{Vitae sophistarum} 2, 1, 33 and Eusebius, \textit{Chron.} for the year 165 A.D.
\textsuperscript{13} The main source on him is Eusebius, \textit{Antirhetorica adversus Hier.}, but the present note is found in Stephanus of Byzantium s.v. Brachmanes and Tzetzes, \textit{Chil.} 7, 716-724.
\textsuperscript{14} Rufinus, \textit{Hist. eccl.} 1, 9; Cedrenus 1, p. 516f.
\textsuperscript{15} Even if the story is true, it is rather important to remember that he never reached India. Notwithstanding repeated attempts to show Indian influences in Neo-Platonism (see e.g. Przyluski 1934 and Lacome 1951, among the more serious ones), it remains true that, though “undoubtedly, intellectual affinities do exist ... the parallels are too tenuous to afford any likelihood of direct influences” (quoted from Almond 1987, 244).
\textsuperscript{16} Note here the use of the word Brachmanes (in the late Latin form with g), which was only known in the West since Alexander’s Indian campaigns.
\textsuperscript{17} Among early sources, see e.g. Clemens of Alexandria, \textit{Stromateis} 4, 7, 50, 1 & 6, 4, 38, 21f. (also several other references to the Gymnosophists). Further Pseudo-Palladius 2. See Berg 1970.
\textsuperscript{18} Starting with the \textit{Collatio Alexandri et Dandamis}.
\textsuperscript{19} Clement of Alexandria, \textit{Stromateis} 1, 15, 71, 3-6; Jerome, \textit{Adversus Iovinianum} 1, 42. See e.g. Scott 1985, and Dihle 1984, 98ff.
\end{flushleft}
together and it was polemically claimed that the Greeks had derived their philosophy from these Eastern nations.\textsuperscript{20} We know, of course, that there is at least some truth in it in the cases of Egypt and Mesopotamia, even Iran, but this was not the point of Christian apologetics. They simply claimed that instead of Christian preachers, the Greeks preferred to believe in barbarian wisdom.

One starting point was the common tendency in the Roman period to ascribe extensive travels to early Greek philosophers and the sphere of their travels tended to become ever wider. While it is quite possible that many really had visited Egypt and Mesopotamia, there were many accounts of spurious Indian travels. It was claimed that Pythagoras,\textsuperscript{21} Lycurgos,\textsuperscript{22} and Democritus\textsuperscript{23} all visited India.

It was commonly accepted that India had one of the independent religions and philosophical traditions of the world.\textsuperscript{24} This is, in fact, a much more popular theme in early Christian literature than accounts of a Christian mission to India (by Bartholomew or Thomas).\textsuperscript{25} A surprisingly rare theme was the prediction of the conversion of India in the near future, found e.g. in Venantius Fortunatus.\textsuperscript{26}

There were various ideas about contacts and relations between Oriental religions. Quoting the 2nd century Pythagorean philosopher Numenius of Apamea (F 1a), Eusebius (\textit{Praeparatio Evangelica} 9, 71) simply lumped together the Brachmanes, Jews, Magi and Egyptians and made them all the sources of Plato, while Hippolytus (\textit{Philosophoumena} 1, 13, 2) claimed that Democritus of Abdera had studied under the Indian Gymnosophistae, Egyptian priests, Babylonian astronomers, and Iranian Magi.\textsuperscript{27} Tertullian (\textit{adv. Marcionem} 1, 13) mentioned together Persian Magi, Egyptian Hierophants and Indian Gymnosophistai, who all “indignas mundi substantias ... collunt,” while Origenes (\textit{De Principiis} 3, 3, 2) listed the secret doctrines of the Egyptians, Chaldaean astrology, Indian supernatural doctrines, and Greek doctrines of divinity as forming the “wisdom of the princes of this world.” According to Philostratus (\textit{Vitae soph.} 1, 1, 2), the Egyptians, Indian and Chaldaeans all rely on the stars for truth.

In the early third century B.C. the peripatetic philosopher Clearchus of Soloi\textsuperscript{28} had claimed that the Indian philoso-
phers were descendants of the Persian Magi. Much later (at the end of the 4th century A.D.), Ammianus Marcellinus (23, 6, 33) stated that Zoroaster himself had been in India and founded the religion of the Magi on the doctrines of the Brachmanes. 29 Ptolemy, in his Geography (7, 1, 74), had introduced the Brachmanai Magoi as a Central Indian tribe. 30 Porphyrius, too, mentioned Indian Brachmanes and Persian Magi together. 31

In the early third century B.C. Megasthenes (F 3), quoted by Clement of Alexandria (Stromateis 1, 15, 72, 5), had also claimed that among barbarian peoples the Jews and Indians had ancient traditions of philosophy and were as wise as the Greeks. Soon afterwards Clearchus 32 suggested that Indian philosophers were the ancestors of the Jews. This kind of idea could understandably not survive in Christian literature.

The question of the supposed contacts between India and Egypt is more complicated. The companions of Alexander and Megasthenes had identified certain Indian cults 33 with that of Dionysus, who was thus made the first conqueror of India. In Hellenistic speculation Dionysus (Latin Liber Pater) was identified with Osiris and this established a supposed connection between the two lands. After his Indian campaigns, this Dionysus–Osiris returned to Egypt. 34 Philostratus (Vita Ap. 6, 6–21) let Apollonius meet a second chapter of Gymnosophists in the southern confines of Egypt, although their relation to India remains somewhat shadowy. 35 In later sources it is often stated that there was an ancient migration from India to Egypt or Ethiopia. 36 To some extent these accounts can be explained by the old confusion between India and Ethiopia. 37

India was early given a clear place in the Biblical world view. Actually this was already established by Hellenistic Jewish philosophers. 38 Flavius Josephus in the late first century had already written that the river Phison of Paradise was in fact the same as the Ganges, that India was originally colonized by Shem’s descendants, and that Ophir, the gold country of Solomon (I Kings 10:11 and II Chron. 9:10), was in India. 39 All these themes were accepted by Christian au-

---

29 For the Irano-Indian contacts see also Scholia in Horatii Carmina 2, 2, 17.
30 See also the Theban Scholasticus’ account 1, 11ff. on the Brachmanes as a separate tribe living on both sides of the Ganges.
31 Quoted by Proclus, Commentaria in Platonis Timaeum 2, 2, p. 218 Diehl.
32 F 69 in Josephus, Contra Apionem 178. See also Scherman 1943, 252f.
33 See Karttunen 1989, 212ff.
34 Dionysus as Osiris campaigning in India in Diodor 1, 19, 7; 1, 27, 5; 4, 1. In a curious passage of Lucian, De Iside 29, Dionysus brought two bulls named Apis and Osiris from India to Egypt.
35 In Vita Ap. 3, 20 and perhaps 3, 32, however, their supposed Indian origin is made clear. Further, “Indorum Brachmanes et Aethiopum Gymnosophistae” also in Jerome, In Ezech. prophet. comm. 4; in Jerome, Epist. 53, 1, 4; and in Sidonius Apollinaris, Epist. 8, 3, 4.
36 An early (but brief) reference in Strabo 17, 3, 7, then Isidorus, Etym. 9, 2, 128. Syncellus, Chronogr. ad mundi annum 3857ff. (p. 286 Dindorf = p. 177 Mosshammer, quoting Pseudo-Manetho) dated this migration to the time of Pharaoh Amenophthis (19th Dynasty).
37 There are some minor points connected with this. Several classical authors move the legend of Perseus from Ethiopia to India, and often it is also stated that the Phoenix, though dying in Egypt, spends his life in India. For the confusion, see Karttunen 1989, 134ff.
38 In addition to the cases mentioned below, we may note that Philo of Alexandria, the Hellenized Jewish philosopher of the early first century A.D., did at least four times mention Indian Gymnosophists with approval (De Abrahamo 182; De somnis 2, 56; and Quod omnis probus liber sit 74 & 93ff. For possible further use of the Gymnosophists in Jewish tradition, see Derrett 1983.
39 Josephus, Antiquitates Judaicae 1, 38 (Phison); 1, 147 (colonisation); and 8, 164 & 176 (Ophir). India next to Paradise and Shem’s descendants in India also in the Pseudepigraphic Liber Jubil., see Hölscher 1949, 58 & 69.
authors, with occasional modifications.

With a remarkable contempt for the known geography, found in the works of Marinus of Tyrrus and Claudius Ptolemy, not only the Ganges and the Indus,40 but also the Euphrates, Tigris,41 and Nile42 were identified with the rivers of Paradise by Josephus and his followers. In some cases the geographical difficulties were explained away with supposed underground passages of rivers. The idea of the Nile having its origins in India was an old one and here only interpreted in a new way to suit it to the interpretation of the Bible.43 Sometimes it was stated more generally that the Garden of Eden was situated in the neighbourhood of India.44 Here we can also note that, according to the Christian poet Dracontius (De laudibus Dei 1, 176-179), the world was, on the third day of creation, like India in spring. The gold-land Ophir, originally in South Arabia, was now commonly accepted to be in India,45 as was also Mediterranean Tarsis.46 In the interpretation of Biblical genealogy (Genesis 10) India belongs to the domains of the descendants of Shem.47 There were even two schools of thought on the supposed genealogy of Indians: The majority derived them from Eber’s son Iektan,48 while others, perhaps influenced by the above-mentioned Hellenistic idea of a close relationship between Indians and Jews, through Eber’s elder son Phalekh from Abraham.49 Beginnings of a new popular

40 Phison = Ganges or Indus in Avitus, Carmina 1, 290ff.; Cosmas 2, 81. Phison = Ganges in Jerome, De situ et nominibus locorum Hebraicorum p. 117 & 122 Ladagar and Epistulae 125, 3; Pseudo-Palladius 1, 1; Augustinus, Commentary on Genesis 8, 7, 3; Eucherius, Instructionum liber 2; Isidorus, Etym. 13, 21, 8; Hrabanus Maurus 11, 10. Phison = Indus in Hippolytus, Chronica 237. The Phison flowing from Paradise to India further in Socrates & Dionysius, De lapidibus 26, 6.

41 In the original text, Genesis 2:10–14, the four rivers were the Phison (flowing around Evilat), the Geon, the Tigris and the Euphrates. But according to Hippolytus, Chronica 239, “some say” that the Phison and Geon are the same as the Tigris and Euphrates.

42 Geon = Nile in Hippolytus, Chronica 237; Eucherius, Instructionum liber 2; Cosmas 2, 32 & 81; Augustinus, Commentary on Genesis 8, 7, 3.

43 It is connected with the age old confusion of Ethiopia and India. Its beginnings lie in Homer (Od. 1, 22–24), who did not know India, but divided Ethiopians into two parts, the second ones living in the extreme east. In the days of Herodotus these Eastern Ethiopians were located in the confines of India, and several authors seemed to think that India was somewhere beyond Ethiopia. Alexander earnestly supposed he had found the upper course of the Nile, when he first saw the Indus, but soon learned the truth (Strabo 15, 1, 25; Arrian, Anabasis 6, 1).

44 Athanasius, Quaest. ad Antiochum 47; Epiphanius, Adversus Haereses 2, 1, 64; Anon. Ravennatis 1; Expositio totius mundi 8; Cosmas 11, 24; beyond the Eastern Ocean, Cosmas 2, 24. According to Antoninus Placentinus, Itinerarium to the Holy Places 41, Indian vessels brought to Clyisma delicious Indian nuts, which were popular among pilgrims as they were said to be growing in the Garden of Eden. See also Darian 1977.

45 Jerome, De situ et nominibus locorum Hebraicorum p. 144 & 149 Ladagar, also Comm. in Isaiam 13, 12, and Epist. 65, 15; Eucherius, Instructionum liber 1, 1. For the Ophir question see the summary in Karttunen 1989, 15ff.

46 I Kings 10:22 & 22:49; Isaiah 2:16; Ezekiel 27:12; in India according to Jerome, Comm. in Isaiam 2, 16, and Epist. 37, 2. Occasionally also the gold-land of Havilah or Evilath (Genesis 2:11, perhaps in Arabia) was, as compassed by the Phison, located in India, see Jerome, De situ... p. 117 and Anon. Ravennatis 2, 1.


48 Hippolytus, Chronica 176; Isidorus, Etym. 9, 2, 5. This was the original idea of Josephus, Ant. Iud. 1, 147.

49 Pseudo-Clemens, Recognitiones 1, 33, 4f.
tradition, Indians as one of the ten tribes, are found in the 3rd century in Sulpicius Severus (Chronica 2, 11, 7). Indians were also said to be present at the Tower of Babel and, according to Origenes (De Principiis 4, 3, 1), the Devil in Matthew 4:8 showed Jesus the kingdoms of Persian, Scythians, Indians, and Parthians.

An interesting case is the relation of Mani to India. Here we have a rare case of real, confirmed Indian influence. Mani, at least, did personally visit India, studied Buddhism there, and included some elements of it in his syncretistic religion. Afterwards his religion became very popular in the West. As wicked dualism, it was so much hated and polemized by Patristic authors that its influence tends to be difficult to establish, especially as the majority of original sources have disappeared.

The Christian legend of the origins of Manichaeism is quite different from the real story. The legend tells of a certain Seythianus, a trader of Arabian origin, who had been in India and learnt Indian ideas there. Back in Egypt he studied more and wrote four books, which were inherited by his pupil Terebinthus. After Seythianus’ death, Terebinthus took the name Buddas, claimed to be born of a virgin and established a sect; and this was maintained to be the origin of Manichaeism. The Indian connections of Manichaeism were probably also the reason for Marius Victorinus’ curious claim that Buddhism is dualistic. That similar stories were told even before Mani’s time is seen in a curious account by Hippolytus: a certain Alcibiades of Apamea came from Syria to Rome and brought with him a book, supposedly written under the inspiration of an angel, saying that the righteous Elchasai had brought it from China (Sêres) to Parthia.

In the end everything was mixed up. In the famous Byzantine encyclopaedia, the Suda. Brachman was the eponymous king of an (apparently Indian) country, while the Brachmanes are a religious people living without possessions on an island of the Ocean (cf. Iambulus and Euhemerus), where they were visited by Alexander. But the Gymnosophists are described as philosophers among Assyrians and Babylonians. At the same time, the fame of Indian wise men continued in mediaeval and Byzantine literature until early modern period. In a way, we can find the roots of the popularity of some Neo-Hindu movements in the West in this age old tradition.

50 Hippolytus, Chronica 200.
52 Ad Justinum Manichaeum 7 (4th century).
53 Philosophoumena 9, 13, 1. Note that Hippolytus died as early as 235/6 A.D.
REFERENCES

Most of the text passages discussed are found in Breloer & Bömer 1939.


