



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation
of

Anna Katalin Aklan

Entitled

**Wandering Lotuses:
Parallel Philosophical Illustrations in Late Antique Greek and in
Indian Philosophies**

will be held on

Tuesday, 11 September 2018, at 11:00

in the

**Senate Room – Monument Building
Central European University (CEU)
Budapest, Nádor u. 9.**

Examination Committee

Chair	István Bodnár (Department of Philosophy, CEU)
Members	István Perczel (supervisor, Dept. of Medieval Studies, CEU) Ferenc Ruzsa (supervisor, Dept. of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, Eötvös Loránd University)
External readers	Hugo David (École française d'Extrême Orient, Pondicherry Centre), present Péter Lautner (Dept. of Philosophy, Pázmány Péter Catholic University), present

The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection on the CEU e-learning site.
Should you wish to access it contact Csilla Dobos (dobos@ceu.edu)

Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation

*As the lotus wanders from one pond to another without any means of conveyance*¹ – compares Śāṅkara the creative activity of Brahman to an assemblage of lotuses which appear without any perceivable means of transfer in a pond where previously there were none, most probably from another pond where they have been seen before. The title of this dissertation is an allusion to the same or similar philosophical examples that are present in Late Antique Greek and in Indian philosophies separately, without any explicit means of transfer. Similarly to Śāṅkara's unrefuted opponents, in the dissertation I attempt to give a logical explanation to these parallels.

In my approach to comparative philosophy, this study examines the possibility of historical influence between philosophical texts. Other approaches, such as structural, conceptual, or phenomenological comparisons are also present and certainly accepted in scholarship, where the question of influence is consciously avoided. The present research, however, is explicitly dedicated to the question of influence from India to Greece, or *vice versa*, and as such, is intended to be a continuation of previous work done by other scholars regarding the texts examined here. The focus of the dissertation is philosophical illustrations. It was not obvious how to term these phenomena in philosophical works. They have been and can be labelled similes, but during the course of the study I had to realize, however, that these phenomena are more than simple stylistic embellishments of philosophical texts. They comprise inseparable structural elements of theoretical explanations, and are applied to clarify and specify abstract theories. In some cases, these similes resemble proverbs, but at the same time they comprise a separate category from them, inasmuch as they are used especially in philosophical contexts, exclusively for illustrating philosophical tenets.

The central part of the dissertation contains two separate studies. The first study is a comparison of a treatise written by the Neoplatonist Porphyry (234–305 CE), and a longer passage from a fundamental text written by the most revered proponent of Advaita Vedanta, Śāṅkara (cc. 8th c. CE). The other study investigates philosophical illustrations present in the Pyrrhonist (Sceptic) Sextus Empiricus' writings (2nd century CE) and in various Indian philosophical texts.

Chapter 1 provides a general **Introduction** to the topic. The dissertation is placed within a special theoretical framework: maritime histories as understood by Nicholas Purcell and

¹ *Padminī cānapekṣya kiṁñait prasthāna-sādhanaṁsaro'ntarāt saro'ntaraṁpratiṣṭhate...* BSBh 2.1.25. Translated by George Thibaut.

Peregrine Horden, hallmarked by their term “thalassology.” They developed and extended the approach of Mediterraneism, advanced by Fernand Braudel. They offer a new paradigm, a novel approach to geographical borders, which have been regarded as rigid separating borders for the past centuries, and are still regarded so by many. According to their theory, all seas, oceans, and in fact all geographical boundaries, are recognized as permeable frontiers, which allowed for goods and also ideas to be exchanged, thus providing a possibility for continuous communication even between distant areas, which have mostly been studied separately. Horden and Purcell suggest that the extension of physical and temporal boundaries of the areas under research can bring new results. Following their approach, in the dissertation I regard the Mediterranean and India as two entities within a wider unit of the *Oikoumenē*, the inhabited world as the ancient Greek knew it, and which truly became a global economy after Alexander the Great’s conquests after 326 BCE.

Besides describing the theoretical framework, the introductory chapter also provides an overview of the historical background. As the philosophical problems under study belong to Late Antiquity, mainly the 2nd and 3rd centuries on the Greek side, and pertain to the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Mediterranean and India, an introduction to the interaction between the two cultures is given, based on archaeological, literary, epigraphical and other evidence. I also give an outline of the historical contacts regarding philosophy, i.e. the possible points of contact between the two cultures, based on literary and archaeological sources. As it is well-known, the beginning of the Common Era saw an increased activity in trade between the Mediterranean and India, as witnessed, among others, by the anonymous navigational and mercantile handbook, *The Circumnavigation of the Red Sea*. The book describes port cities and items of trade along the Arabian Peninsula and India. Some of these ancient ports have been excavated and identified (although in some cases not conclusively), such as Berenike and Myos Hormos in Africa, and Poduke and Musiris in India. It seems that Indian traders, seamen, and probably some permanent settlers were present in Egypt and Ethiopia, and *vice versa*, at least a temporary Greek-speaking population was also present in South Indian ports.

As it is also well-known, this was not the first time of encounters between Greeks and Indians. In the second century BCE following Alexander’s campaign, Indo-Greek kingdoms were established on the North-Western frontiers of India, where complete Hellenistic cities flourished, keeping contacts with mainland Greece, or at least with the Hellenistic kingdoms active and alive. The most obvious example is Ai Khanum, where even a papyrus containing a philosophical texts and epigraphy of Delphic maxims were discovered.

The chapter on history also includes a section of an outline of the possible points of contact for philosophical influence as found in archaeological and literary evidence, starting from the Presocratics and concluding with the Hellenistic times. The main investigations of the dissertation are placed in this theoretical and historical background.

Chapter 2 contains a **Literature Review** on comparative studies between Greek and Indian philosophies (excluding works dealing with historical or other cultural relations, e.g. mythology or literature). Besides general works, the chapter introduces literature about the two main topics of the dissertation: Neoplatonism and Advaita Vedānta, and Scepticism and Indian philosophy. Additionally, a section on works of comparisons between various other schools is included. A concluding section addresses the question of comparative Greek and Indian philosophy as a separate field of study.

Chapters 3 and 4 comprise the center of the dissertation, presenting two case studies in comparative Late Antique and Indian philosophies. **Chapter 3** focuses on two similar passages in **Neoplatonism and Advaita Vedānta**. The Greek text is a lost work by Porphyry summarized by a later representative of the school, Proclus (412–485 CE) in his voluminous commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. The Indian text comes from one of the founding works of Advaita Vedānta, the eighth-century philosopher Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, a commentary to the founding text of the schools, the anonymous *Brahmasūtra*. The research is a direct continuation of the comparison of two passages discovered by Émile Bréhier in the 1950s and developed further by István Perczel. To my knowledge, no other scholar has dealt with this material, and this is the first instance when the two texts have been studied in their original languages. I examined the two texts carefully within their wider philosophical contexts, with a special attention to their strong attachment to the traditions they belong, investigating not only their own philosophical schools and predecessors, but also their opponents.

The polemical texts refute the idea of the creation of the world, while maintaining its ontological dependency on the highest principle. Due to a detailed textual and contextual comparison, I have found that the connections which link the texts to their respective traditions are very strong and make the texts embedded in their respective traditions to the extent that the similarities, which are obviously present, do not indicate direct connections between them. In addition, I have found that the parallels are limited to the philosophical illustrations and do not extend to deeper philosophical implications, i.e. structural and conceptual connections which would be due to direct influence do not exist between the two texts. The parallels are confined to the

philosophical illustrations, which, on the other hand, undoubtedly exist. These examples, that are present in both texts, were most probably due to intellectual exchange – even if not due to influence out of textual contact but most probably due to verbal communication. Both texts are deeply embedded in their own traditions and display several layers of previous philosophies. It is difficult to tell in what period the parallel expressions were transferred from one culture to the other. It seems practical to postulate a “common pool” of philosophical expressions, a certain distinct philosophical language, which was available to philosophers of both cultures. Various authors used these illustrations as building blocks in the expression of their theories, transforming and altering them as it best fitted their purposes.

The second case study in **Chapter 4** is concerned with the writings of the Sceptic philosopher **Sextus Empiricus**, whose works show a remarkable plenitude of similar elements that occur abundantly within various kinds of **Indian philosophies**. Following Aram M. Frenkian’s investigation, my thesis re-examines the three elements identified by Frenkian as Indian influences in Sextus’ *oeuvre*: the smoke-fire illustration, the snake-rope analogy, and the quadrilemma. The same elements, among others, were identified by Thomas McEvilley as evidence of Greek influence upon Madhyamaka Buddhism.

This chapter starts with some methodological observations, as the comparison of these philosophical illustrations presented serious methodological challenges. One of the greatest difficulty is the expanse of philosophical literature, and the great extent to which texts have been lost. In order to make the research feasible, I had to make a serious restriction to include only existing written evidence, which on the one hand excludes the possibility of a given example being present in earlier texts which have been lost, but on the other hand, makes the material accessible to scholarly investigation. Besides, I have decided to respect existing chronologies and make it a priority to take chronology into consideration when searching after possible influences.

After inspecting the supposedly earliest occurrences in both Greek and Indian philosophy and literature, one has to acknowledge, at least until other evidence occurs, that these three elements are not indicators of borrowing – they probably form part of the shared metaphors and ways of expressions described above. There is one exception, however, in the case of the smoke-fire example used in the theory of signs, when not only the illustration but the whole theory is present in both traditions – but due to lack of other evidence and especially due to the lack of

clearly determined chronologies it is difficult to assess the actual type and cause of intertextuality.

Chapter 5 provides an overall **Conclusion** to the topics examined in the dissertation. Since there is no solid method of proving that there was an exchange of the parallel philosophical illustrations under research, postulating a "common pool" of examples, a certain verbal communication of intellectuals or philosophers discussing and exchanging philosophical views has a heuristic value in accounting for the similarities and for the differences present regarding the examples discussed in the dissertation. Also, this can provide an explanation for the simultaneous occurrences in the broader timeframes of the individual parallels, however serious the chronological difficulties that are present might be. Speaking about influences or diffusion, however, does not involve servile borrowing and copying. The philosophical illustrations involve mostly images, metaphors, similes and other linguistic expressions, that seem to be "travelling." Contrary to the lack of precise, palpable evidence on borrowing, interaction could have been probable given the plentiful evidence of connection between the two cultures especially after the time of Alexander. These results fit the theory outlined in the Introduction. These cultural areas, the Greek and the Indian, did not exist in isolation from each other. The seas and lands that separated them served just as much as bridges between the two far-away regions. The frequently mentioned but rarely demonstrated intellectual exchange accompanying the fervent trade relations in the first century CE, but which were present already much earlier, and extended some centuries later, can be traced in the philosophical parallels examined in my dissertation. Although many details are and will remain in the darkness of historical distance, the available data does reinforce my original hypothesis that the broader area of the *Oikoumenē*, the known and inhabited world, especially after, but also probably before Alexander's campaign, did provide space for intellectual exchange. Furthermore, the research has yielded several minor results along the way, e.g. the methodological propositions, the identification of Porphyry's and Śaṅkara's opponents, or the mapping of the various philosophical illustrations on the Indian side. I hope that these results stand on their own rights and are valuable additions to scholarship.

Curriculum Vitae

Studies

- 2010-2018 Ph.D. studies at the Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University
Supervisors: István Perczel (CEU), Ferenc Ruzsa (ELTE)
- 2014 M.A. Teacher of Ancient Greek Language and Literature,
Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences (ELTE PPK)
- 2013 M.A., Philologist in Ancient Greek Language and Literature,
Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE BTK)
- 2009 M.A., Indology, ELTE BTK
- 2006 M.A., Latin Teacher, ELTE PPK
- 2005 M.A., Philologist in Latin Language and Literature, ELTE BTK

Scholarships, Honors and Awards

- 2018 Febr – May Field scholarship of the French Institute for Asian Studies (École française d’Extrême Orient, EFEO).
Project title: “Advaita Vedānta and Present-day Practice.”
- 2017 Aug-Sep Doctoral Research Support Grant by CEU:
Two months at the Pondicherry Centre, EFEO
- 2010-2013 Full Doctoral Fellowship, Central European University.
- 2002-2003 Student Fellowship for outstanding achievement
granted by the Hungarian Republic.
- 2001 July-Aug Joint scholarship of Ben Gurion University (Israel), the Claremont Graduate University (USA) and the Hungarian Ministry of Education
Participation in the archeological survey of ancient Philistia.
- 2000 July-Aug Joint scholarship of Trinity College (USA) and Claremont Graduate School (USA)
Participation in the archeological survey of ancient Philistia.
- 1999-2000 Open Society Institute-Kellner Scholarship
Conducting studies at the Classics Department of Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, USA, for an academic year.
- 2000 May First Prize, Melvin W. Title Latin Prize, Trinity College.
- 2000 May First Prize, James Goodwin Greek Prize, Trinity College.

Conference papers delivered relevant to the dissertation

- May 2018 “Smoke and Fire in Sextus Empiricus’ Writings and in Indian Philosophy.” *Ütközéspontok* 5. University of Szeged. Organized by the Philosophy Branch, Hungarian Association of Doctoral Students (DOSZ).
- June, 2017 “Charition: Encounter at the Borders.” Center For Eastern Mediterranean Studies, CEU, 5th Graduate Conference: *Building, Bending and Breaking Boundaries of the Mediterranean World*.
- May, 2017 “Porphyry and Śaṅ kara.” 9th Middle European Students’ Indology Conference (MESIC), Wrocław, Poland.
- June 2011 “Neoplatonism and Indian philosophy.” Graduate colloquium *West meets East: Contact and Interaction between India and the Mediterranean World from the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity*. History Dept., University College London.

Works published

"Contradictions around the Stoic Sage. Chapter 20 of Plutarch’s On Stoic Self-Contradictions (De Stoicorum Repugnantiis 1043B–1044B).” *Elpis* 19 (2018/2) (forthcoming)

“The Snake-And-Rope Analogy in Greek and Indian Philosophies.” *Annual of Medieval Studies At CEU* 24 (2018).

"Tengeri történelem: thalasszológia és az Indiai-óceán-tanulmányok." In: *Hamārī adhyāpikā. Tanulmányok Indiáról Négyesi Mária tiszteletére*. Szerk.: Ittész Máté. Budapest: ELTE BTK Indológia Tanszék, 2018. 15-30.

"Plutarchos a barátságról." („Plutarch on Friendship.”) *Antik Tanulmányok* LIX (2015) 165–193.