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THE INDIAN HERO IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH:  
ON THE MEANING OF THE WORD *DEVAPUTRA*\*

The word *devaputra* which literally means ‘son of god’ occurs in various Indian sources: in the Sanskrit epics, in the Buddhist literature, in epigraphics and on coinage. The only (to the best of my knowledge) paper dealing specially with the Sanskrit word *devaputra* was published more than eighty years ago by Sylvain Lévi (Lévi 1934). According to S. Lévi, this word appears in Indian literature in three different meanings:

1. in the Sanskrit epics it refers to some epic heroes and has its literal meaning – «son of a god» (as is in the case of the Pāṇḍava brothers);

2. in the Buddhist literature, *devaputra* / *devaputta* designates an inhabitant of the Tuṣita heaven or another *devaloka*;

3. *devaputra* was also used as a title of the Kuṣāṇa emperors. In this case, as suggested by S. Lévi, it was a rendering of the Chinese royal title «Son of Heaven».

Neither S. Lévi nor any other author known to me has spotted any semantic connection between these three usages.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that there is still a certain semantic link between the three of them, and that at the base of the three different usages lies a common mythological background.

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## 1. *Devaputra* in the Sanskrit Epics

In order to define this background we have to begin our analysis with the *Mahābhārata* (Mbh), because, as it seems, the epic holds the key to the solution of the problem.

It is quite clear why the epithet *devaputra* or its synonym *devasūnu* refers to the Pāṇḍava brothers: they are indeed presented in the epic as sons of the gods, and the story of a divine birth of each of them is related in detail (Mbh I, 104; 113. 32-43; 114-115). Thus Yudhiṣṭhira, the elder brother, is rightly called ‘the son of god’ because he was born of the god Dharma. Arjuna was begotten by Indra, Bhīma by Vāyu, and their unrecognized brother Karṇa was the son of the Sun god Sūrya. The younger Pāṇḍavas, Nakula and Sahadeva, too, are of divine paternity (Mbh 3, 48.2), begotten by the divine twins Aśvins. All Pāṇḍavas are called “sons of gods” in a remarkable context: Bhīṣma in his speech addressed to Dhṛtarāṣṭra calls them “heroes (*vīra*), sons of gods (*devaputra*)”:

*enam āśritya putras te mandabuddhiḥ suyodhanaḥ  
avamanyata tān vīrān devaputrān ariṃdamān*

“Your nitwit son, Suyodhana, relies on him (Karṇa) and despises these heroes, sons of gods, tamers of enemies”.

(Mbh 5, 48. 35)

As we shall see, there is a constant association between the words *vīra* and *devaputra* in the texts of ancient Indian culture.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the word *devaputra* is used only in its literal meaning, and very seldom. In one case, Rāvaṇa asks: Who are the leaders of this army of monkeys which is going to attack Laṅkā? What is their origin? And the answer he receives is that all of them are practically *devaputras*: Hanumān is the son of Vāyu, commander of the army of monkeys, Nīla – the son of Agni, Nala the architect – the son of Viśvakarman, the hero Aṅgada – the grandson of Indra. The monkey warrior Dadhimukha was born of Soma, Jyotirmukha of Sūrya, Suṣena

of Dharma. Several monkey heroes are called sons of Yama Vaivasvata, and at the end of this long list the speaker, Rāvaṇa's scout Śārdūla, notes that it is impossible to mention all the remaining *devaputras* among the innumerable monkey leaders (Rām 6, 21.17-29). At the end of the poem, *devaputras*, "sons of gods" are mentioned, together with "sons of ṛṣis" and "sons of gandharvas" in the list of various living beings who gathered in order to follow Rāma on his last journey (*mahāprasthāna*), i.e. on his way to Heaven (Rām 7, 98.17-18).

In the *Rāmāyana*, the use of the epithet *devaputra* seems to be rather conventional: it is a traditional artistic device the original meaning of which has long been forgotten. In the *Mahābhārata* however the situation is different. There is an archaic layer in its contents (Vassilkov 1995; Vasil'kov 2010: 338-339) in which another usage and another meaning of the word *devaputra* /*devasūnu* can be traced down.

In the *Mahābhārata*, *devaputra* may sometimes refer to an unknown hero who performs a heroic endeavour. Thus, in the *Virāṭaparvan* (Mbh, Book IV), one of the Pāṇḍavas, Arjuna, lives unrecognized at the court of Virāṭa, the king of the Matsya tribe in the guise of a dancing-master (a eunuch or a transvestite). But when the Pāṇḍavas' enemies, Kauravas launch a raid on the king's herds and steal Virāṭa's cattle, Arjuna, when he is alone with the king's son Uttara, temporarily assumes his real form of a great hero and mounts a chariot.

He allows Uttara to drive the chariot and he himself, as a chariot-warrior, strikes a crushing blow to the Kauravas' army. After that he once again assumes the form of a weak and effeminate dancing-master. When Uttara returns to the Matsya capital Virāṭanagara after the battle, the father greets him as a victor and asks him how he managed to defeat the great Kaurava warriors.

Uttara replies: "It was not I who won back the cattle, nor I who defeated the enemies: everything was done by one *devaputra*. When I ran away in terror, that youth, that son of a god (*devaputra*) stopped me, and stood up in the pit of the chariot like the One with the *vajra* in his hand (i.e. Indra)! It was he who won back the cows, he who overcame the

Kauravas. This deed was done by this hero (*vīra*), not by me, father!”<sup>1</sup>

On hearing this, king Virāṭa asks his son: “Where is the strong-armed hero (*vīra*), that glorious *devaputra*, who in battle won back my treasure-herd (*dhanam*; cf. *godhanam* ‘the herd as property/treasure’)? I wish to see that mighty man and pay him honour, because this *devasūnu* have saved for me you and my cows!”<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from the context that neither the king nor Uttara knows that the hero is Arjuna who was indeed born of the god (Indra). If a certain warrior acts as a hero, this alone allows one to suspect that he may be the son of a god. The term *devaputra*, ‘son of god’, therefore becomes very close in meaning to the term *vīra*, hero. Not accidentally, the two terms now and again occur together, as they do in the verses adduced in footnotes 1 and 2 and in the verse Mbh 5, 48, 35 quoted in the text above. It must be added also that the word *devaputra* is practically always used in a specific context: i.e. in descriptions of bravery and glorious deeds of the heroes.

One more example is that of Karṇa, a tragic hero, an unrecognized brother of the Pāṇḍavas born by their common mother Kuntī from the Sun-god Sūrya. He was adopted by a *sūta* (i.e. a man from the caste of professional charioteers and bards). Karṇa grew up in the family of the *sūta* Adhiratha unaware of his true origins. It happened so that he became an ally of the Kauravas and an enemy of the Pāṇḍavas, his

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<sup>1</sup> *na mayā nirjitā gāvo na mayā nirjitāḥ pare |*  
*kṛtaṃ tu karma tat sarvaṃ devaputrena kena cit ||*  
*sa hi bhītaṃ dravantaṃ māṃ devaputro nyavārayat |*  
*sa cātiṣṭhad rathopasthe vajrahastanibho yuvā ||*  
*tena tā nirjitā gāvas tena te kuravo jitāḥ |*  
*tasya tat karma vīrasya na mayā tāta tat kṛtam ||*

(Mbh 4, 64.19-21)

<sup>2</sup> *kva sa vīro mahābāhur devaputro mahāyaśāḥ |*  
*yo me dhanam avājaiṣīt kurubhīr grastam āhave ||*  
*icchāmi tam ahaṃ draṣṭum arcitum ca mahābalaṃ |*  
*yena me tvaṃ ca gāvaś ca rakṣitā devasūnunā ||*

(Mbh 4, 64. 30-31)

unrecognized brothers. In an episode from Book Eight of the Mbh, Duryodhana, the Mbh's main villain, while praising the bravery and heroic looks of Karṇa, says to his companion-in-arms Śalya: "I don't believe that Karṇa could be born in the family of *sūtas*; I suppose he is a *devaputra* born in a family of *kṣatriyas*"<sup>3</sup>.

From this context once again follows that in the archaic layer of the epic, any true hero was perceived as a character of divine or semi-divine origins. Comparative studies of the epic are very persuasive, and there is no doubt that in most of the world's archaic epics, the hero is regarded as a demigod, the son of a god, or his partial incarnation who has come down to the world of humans to combat its evils personified by monstrous opponents. I insist that alongside features of a classical heroic and, even, didactic epic, the Mbh has retained characteristic features of an epic at the archaic stage of its development (see, e.g.: Vassilkov 1995). The most significant feature of such epics is the divinity of heroes. The divine origin of the Mbh heroes is not a result of their later "divinization" by the Brahmanic "editors", as many scholars believe; the divinity of its heroes was an essential element of both the ideology and the poetics of the epic right from the start. I share this point of view with such scholars as S. Wikander (1947), P.A. Grintser (1974), W. Doniger (1978), G. Dumézil (1986: 33-255), J.D. Smith (1990), G. Nagy (2006: 14-18), C. Vielle (2011) and others.

Very instructive is a comparison of the Mbh with oral heroic epics of present day India, sung and recorded in many different languages. Most of them may be classified as archaic heroic epics, and in most of them the heroes are sons of gods or their incarnations on earth.

The heroes of the Mbh may be regarded as model archaic heroes: they are sons of gods and their incarnations too. Having performed superhuman deeds and "having sacrificed himself on the fire of battle", a Mbh hero ascends to heaven to rest in

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<sup>3</sup>*nāpi sūtakule jātaṃ karṇaṃ manye kathaṃcana |  
devaputram ahaṃ manye kṣatriyāṇāṃ kulodbhavam ||*

(Mbh 8, 24.159)

Indra's warrior paradise or in the worlds of other gods. In Book Eighteen of the Mbh, all epic heroes eventually find themselves in paradise, each one becoming either maximally close to his "heavenly father", the god whose incarnation he was upon earth (Mbh 18, 4.9-18) or "joining" him, "entering into" his divine father (see the use of such forms as *viveśa*, *āviveśa*, *praviveśa*, *viviśuḥ* in Mbh 18, 5.10, 11, 15, 17, 18, 20) and thus partaking of his essence.

What happens to the heroes thereafter? It can be suggested that the "children of gods" retain this state in heaven as long as their good *karman* or their *kīrti* (fame) lasts; afterwards they have to take a new incarnation.

Here we have come close to the suggestion that *devaputra* may designate a particular class of celestials. In the Mbh itself we have one context where the word *devaputra* presumably has this specific meaning. The old ṛṣi Cyavana, miraculously turned into a youth by the Aśvins, performs a Soma sacrifice and is going to offer a share of Soma to the divine twins. But this meets a resolute protest from Indra who says: "In my opinion these two Nāsatyas are not worthy of Soma. They are [nothing but] healers (*bhiṣajau*) to the *devaputras*, and their occupation makes them unworthy" (Mbh 3, 124.9).<sup>4</sup>

Translators usually render it as "healers of/to the sons of gods" without comments. The meaning of this expression is obscure. Were the Aśvins a kind of pediatricians in Paradise? Or did they wander across the earth healing the wounds of *devaputras* – i.e. of great heroes?<sup>5</sup> But in the Vulgata text (Bombay edition: Mahābhārata 1901) we find a different variant

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<sup>4</sup> *ubhāv etau na somārḥau nāsatyāv iti me matiḥ |*  
*bhiṣajau devaputrānām | karmanā naivam arhataḥ ||*

<sup>5</sup> This interpretation could be partly supported by a śloka from the next Indra's speech: "They are healers, craftsmen, changing form according to their will and wandering in the world among the mortals: how can they be worthy of soma here?"

*cikitsakau karmakarau kāmārūpasamanvitau |*  
*loke carantau martyānām katham somam ihārḥataḥ ||*

(Mbh 3, 124.12)

Physicians were treated by the Brāhmanic sources as a kind of craftsmen, therefore their social status was rather low.

of the same *śloka* which may turn our thoughts in another direction:

*ubhāv etau na somārhau nāsatyāv iti me matiḥ |*  
*bhiṣajau divi devānām karmaṇā tene nā 'rhataḥ ||*  
 (Mbh, Bomb. ed., 3, 124. 9)

“They are the physicians of the gods in heaven, and this kind of occupation makes them not worthy (of Soma)”

The possibility of two variants in different MSS: “physicians to the sons of gods” and “physicians of the gods in heaven”, makes it more probable that the term *devaputra* in Indra’s speech in the version of the Critical edition refers to some kind of celestials, not different essentially from the gods themselves (see below examples of similar understanding of the term in the early texts of the Buddhist Pāli Canon). To sum up, there is ample evidence to conclude that in the archaic layer of the Mbh’s contents we find the idea of the epic hero as a demigod who has been sent to the earth in order to fulfill a certain mission and who, after completing his task, returned to the heavenly world.

This idea was inherent in the archaic culture of India and lingered on for many centuries in the warrior milieu and in the societies of mobile pastoralists. The so-called hero-stones (*vīrastambha*, *kīrtistambha* etc.) widespread in the Deccan and in the peripheral regions of the subcontinent may serve as illustrations to this idea. In their classical tripartite form the hero-stones have, in their middle part, a picture of the Apsarās attending to a fallen hero during his ascendance to heaven. In the upper part the hero is usually represented enjoying bliss in paradise in the proximity of «his» personal god. Sometimes he is shown as having become one with the god (Vassilkov 2011: 201-202).

Having reconstructed in the archaic layer of the Mbh the idea of a hero as *devaputra*, a demigod who comes down to earth and then returns to heaven, let us turn to the Buddhist literature. Here we suddenly find that the epic concept of a hero as

*devaputra* enables us to explain something that has not been given yet, as it seems to me, a satisfactory explanation.

## 2. Devaputta in the Pāli Buddhist Canon

The word *devaputta* is often used in canonical and post-canonical Pāli Buddhist texts. The paradise in the Tusita heaven and all other «worlds of gods» (*devaloka*) are populated with a specific class of celestials – *devaputtas*. In the early texts *devaputtas* live in heavenly worlds side by side with *devas* “gods” and *devatās* “deities”; it is difficult to trace any differences between this three classes of celestials or to represent them in a hierarchical system. For example, in the *Kevaṭṭasutta* (D I.11) Buddha tells to a monk named Kevaṭṭa a story of another monk, who was obsessed with a question: is there a place where the four elements of nature – water, fire, wind and earth – cease without remainder? In order to get an answer to this question, the monk went first to “gods of the retinue of the Four Great Kings” (*cātummahārājikā devā*). But these gods did not know the answer and advised the monk to approach the Four Great Kings themselves, “who are higher and more sublime than we”. It should be noted that the Four Great Kings (*cattāro mahārājāno*) – Guardians of the directions (points of the compass) – are usually defined in the Tipiṭaka texts as *devaputtas*.<sup>6</sup> The Four Great Kings could not answer the monk’s question either; they sent him to the Thirty Three gods (*tāvatiṃsā devā*) possessing, in their opinion, a superior knowledge. But the Thirty Three *devas* proved to be unable to help the monk; they directed him to Sakka, king of the gods (*sakko nāma devānamindo*).<sup>7</sup> Sakka failed to help him and readdressed him to the Yāma gods (*yāmā devā*), “who are higher and more sublime than I”. But the Yāma gods had to

<sup>6</sup> The Four Great Kings very often are mentioned in the texts merely as “The Four *devaputtas*” (*cattāro devaputtā*). See, e.g. D 5.1 (*Mahāpadānasutta*): *cattāro naṃ devaputtā catuddisaṃ rakkhāya upagacchanti* (CST4. L.195754), and many instances of similar use in various commentaries and sub-commentaries.

<sup>7</sup> In Sanskrit: *śakra devānām indra*, i.e. Śakra, Indra (= king) of the gods.



send the monk to a higher authority: Suyāma *devaputta* who is in charge of the world of Yāma *devas*. Having failed to get an answer from Suyāma, the monk approaches then, one by one, three other *devaputtas* in charge of heavenly worlds: Santusita, the head of Tusita gods (*tusitā nāma devā*), Sannimita *devaputta*, the ruler in the world of Nimmānaratī *devas*, and Vasavattī *devaputta*, the head of the Paranimittavasavatī *devas*. The latter sends him to the gods of the retinue of Brahmā (*brahmakāyikā devā*), i.e. to inhabitants of the highest heavenly world. These gods, as the gods of all previously mentioned classes, could not help the monk and directed him to their superior – the great god Brahmā who, as they believe, knew everything. And the latter, to the monk's disappointment, confessed to him secretly, that he did not know the answer. Brahmā advised the monk to go back to the earth and ask the Buddha.

The monk's search starts from the lowest level – the world of the Four Mahārājas,<sup>8</sup> and ends in the highest *devaloka*, that of Mahābrahmā. But the sequence of the monk's progression from one of these two extreme points to another does not allow us to make a conclusion about any difference in status between *deva* and *devaputra*. We can see that in five (out of seven) instances *devaputtas* are mentioned as rulers of the worlds inhabited by *devas*. However this does not mean that the status of a *devaputta* is higher than the status of a *deva*. The only conclusion we can make is that in the *suttas* of the ancient Canon (*MūlaTipiṭaka*) the word *devaputta* could not be understood as a “young deva/divinity”; when a person, having obtained a great religious merit, is reborn in a heavenly world as a *devaputta*, he is, of course, a “young divinity”, but this is a specific situation, which requires an additional adjective (e.g. *abhinavā devaputtā*

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<sup>8</sup> According to *Pāyāsisutta* (D 5.10), the prince Pāyāsi made numerous offerings to *samaṇas* (“wanderers”, “recluses”), *brāhmaṇas*, the poor, the homeless etc. But he did it without enthusiasm, without due thought, not with his own hands, the food and cloths he was giving to the poor were of bad quality; for that reason he was reborn, after his death, as a *devaputta* among the *devas* of the Four Great Kings' world. At the same time the young *brāhmaṇa* Uttara, who made the offering of excellent food and clothes to Pāyāsi himself, was reborn in the bright and happy world of the Thirty Three *devas*.

“new/fresh *devaputtas*”, Dhp-a 2; CST4. L. 461027).<sup>9</sup> Among the *devaputtas*, known to the Pāli Canon, we meet several old Indo-Aryan gods, such as *Candimā* (Skt *Candramas*, the Moon-god) and *Suriya* (Skt *Sūrya*, the Sun; S 1.2.1.9, 10; CST4. L. 219225-226), *Vassavaṇa/Kuvera* (Skt. *Vaiśravaṇa/Kubera*), one of the four *lokapālas*, guardian of the North (D 7.9; CST4. L.63300), *Vissakamma* (Skt *Viśvakarman*), the celestial architect and artisan (see e.g. Mahāsudassanasutta, D 5.4; CST4. L. 43937-940) and, lastly, *Māra*, a continuation of the non-Buddhist Kāma; that is why *Māra*, in spite of being the arch-enemy of the Buddha is always represented in art, at least before his defeat, as a handsome young man with a halo around his head, sometimes with a bow and an arrow in his hands (Guruge 2011: 18-22). In the commentary *Mahāvaggāṭṭhakathā* (D 4.5, L. 34827) and post-canonical *Mahāvamsa* (Childers 1875: 115) all the gods in the world of Thirty Three (*tettiṃsa*, *tāvatiṃsa*) go by the name of *devaputta*.<sup>10</sup> If a man due to his acts of compassion, piety or generosity is reborn as a *devaputta* in a world of gods, as it happened, e.g., with the prince Pāyāsi in the world of *cātummahārājikā* devas (see footnote 8 and CST4. L. 47792, 47812) or with the wealthy donor of the Buddha, Anāthapiṇḍika<sup>11</sup> in the world of the Tusita gods (M 9.5; CST4. L. 207813), or with a young *brāhmaṇa* Maṭṭhakuṇḍala, son of Adinnapubbaka, who is called *devaputta* when reborn in the world of the Thirty three gods (Dhp-a 1; CST4. L. 456575, 456581, 548231), it does not necessarily mean that in the course of time such *devaputta* will become a god. It may merely mean

<sup>9</sup> The word *devaputta* was rendered as “young deva” or “young divinity” in some translations (Milinda’s Questions. 1963-64: 180 etc.; Middle Length Discourses 1995: 610 etc.; Numerical Discourses 2012: 434 etc.)

<sup>10</sup> In the early canonical Mahāyāna sūtras (*vaipulya sūtras*) we find mentioned in the lists of *devaputras* the same figures of ancient gods: Candra (Moon), Sūrya, the four Mahārājās, Māra and, in addition, Īsvara and Maheśvara (Saddharmapūṇḍarīkasūtram 1960: 2)

<sup>11</sup> Anāthapiṇḍika (“feeder of the destitute”) was a wealthy businessman of Sāvattī (Śrāvastī), a lay disciple of the Buddha. Having purchased from prince Jeta his beautiful park (Jetavana) he presented with it the Buddha and his Order. With unparalleled generosity Anāthapiṇḍika spent his enormous fortune feeding the monks and the poor; at the end of his life he was reduced to poverty (more information in: Malalasekera 1937: 67-72).

that there was no clear distinction between *deva* and *devaputta*. That is why *devaputta* is interpreted as “a god” in some dictionaries (Childers 1875: 115; for Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit: Edgerton 1953: 270).

Not only *devaputta* is close in its meaning to *deva*, but members of both classes are identified sometimes with *yakkhas* (Skt *yakṣa*). These are not, of course, the earthly spirits, dryads, ghosts etc.; such identifications imply the celestial *yakkhas*, such as the attendants of Vessavaṇa (Kuvera), inhabitants of his world. Not only Vessavaṇa himself, but other three *lokapālas*, or Great Kings also go by the name of *yakkha*. Sakka, the king of the gods, is often called *yakkha* (Rhys-Davids, Stede 1921-1925: 606). At the most dramatic moment of the Buddha’s dispute with the brāhmaṇa Ambaṭṭha, Vajrapāṇi (according to the commentary – Sakka<sup>12</sup>), the thunderbolt-wielding *yakkha* appears, ready to split with his weapon the head of Ambaṭṭha, who is losing in the dispute, into seven parts (D 1.3; CST4. L. 12119-121). As the *devaputtas* are concerned, we find in various commentaries a standard phrase identifying a *yakkha* as *devaputta* (*yakkho ti devaputto*: Kh 16.2., L. 557568; Kh 30.2, CST4. L. 695038; Kh 32.22, CST4. L.803498; etc.).

How can the fact be explained that in the Buddhist worldview the semantic fields of the words *devaputta*, *deva*, *devatā* and even *yakkha* often overlap, in spite of the differences in their meanings in pre-Buddhist worldview of the Indo-Aryans? We should probably take into account that the Buddhism established its own hierarchy of great beings, men who surpassed the old gods, due to their progress on the path to Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa: *arahants* (*arhats*), *bodhisatt(v)as*, *pratyekabuddhas* / *paccekabudhas* etc. The ancient gods and demigods became, in comparison with new superheroes, insignificant background figures. However the role they play in the Buddhist narratives is fairly active: from time to time they descend from heaven to listen to the Buddha’s sermons or ask him some questions.

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<sup>12</sup> Vajrapāṇi “having *vajra* (thunderbolt) in his hand” is the epithet of Śakra (Indra) in the pre-Buddhist Indo-Aryan mythology.

In the Mahāyāna texts, written in the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, *devaputra*, according to F. Edgerton, is practically synonymous with *deva*, but is used not so often as in the Pāli Canon (Edgerton 1953: 270). However in some of the *sūtras* their role is significant. For example in the first chapter of the *Lalitavistarasūtra* a lot of “*devaputras* from clear celestial dwellings” come to Jetavana where Buddha is staying and ask him how he came down from heaven, was born on earth, grew up, and attained enlightenment (Lalitavistara 1958: 3, 5). The Buddha’s «autobiography» relayed to the *devaputras* makes up the contents of the *Lalitavistarasūtra*. The story begins in Tuṣita heaven, where the future Buddha under the name of Bodhisattva Śvetaketu acts as the head and preceptor of the *devaputras*. When he takes a decision to descend to earth and to take birth in the royal family of the Śākyas, *devaputras* plead with him to stay, but he bids farewell to them, takes off his diadem and puts it on the head of Bodhisattva Maitreya: now Maitreya will be the preceptor of the *devaputras*. There are also many episodes in the Lalitavistara in which celestials arrive to take part in various events upon earth, and these are generally called *devaputras*, or, less commonly – *devas*. In some contexts the words *devaputra* and *deva* seem to be synonymous. *Devaputras* are mentioned not only in the prose parts of the Lalitavistara which are considered to be rather late (about the eighth century CE), but also in the *gāthas* – verses that belong to an earlier period: first centuries CE.

In the Buddhist Pāli literature commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) to the texts of Mūla Tipiṭaka appeared in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE, i.e. not less than seven centuries after the Third Buddhist Council (ca. 250 BCE) that had fixed the Canon in its final form. In one of sub-commentaries to the texts of Saṃyuttanikāya an author tries to explain the original meaning of the word *devaputta* and its relation to the word *devatā*: “When reborn on the lap of the gods, men are *devaputtas* and females – *devadhītas* (“daughters of the gods”). When a name (and, accordingly, a gender identity. – Ya.V.) is not known, we say “a certain deity”, if it is known, we say: ‘who is called

*devaputta*” (S 1.2.1.1).<sup>13</sup> The idea that the word *devaputta* in Pāli is opposed to *devadhīta(r)* and used to express gender distinctions was accepted by the authors of some late sub-commentaries (e.g. Kh 14.2.7.7; CST4. L. 547935) and influenced the definition of the word *devaputta* in Pāli-English dictionaries, from the oldest to the latest.<sup>14</sup> In the early *suttas* there were, of course, words for female deities: *devī*, *devadhīta(r)*, *devakañña* “girl of the gods”, but never, as far as I know, *devaputta* was contrasted with *devadhīta(r)* and viewed as its antonym. We have seen already that *devaputta* of the Pāli *suttas* in its meaning was very close to *deva*. Originally, as I shall try to prove, *devaputta* could mean something like a “demigod”, i.e., a *devaputta*’s status was similar to that of an archaic epic hero.

As already mentioned, mortals who had performed some feats of piety, charity, compassion etc. could be reborn after death as *devaputtas* in the worlds of the gods (see above the examples of prince Pāyāsi, young *brāhmaṇa* Uttara [footnote 8], a rich businessman and the generous donor of the Buddha, Anāthapiṇḍika, a *brāhmaṇa* Maṭṭhakuṇḍala). In a way, it is similar to the destiny of the epic *devaputra*-heroes who, having performed heroic deeds and sacrificed their lives in battle, arrive after death at the warriors’ paradise of Indra, king of the gods.

What awaits Buddhist *devaputtas* in the *devaloka*? Usually a *devaputta* enjoys long and blissful life there. But in the universe of *saṃsāra* there is nothing eternal; sooner or later this lifetime must end. The destiny of an average *devaputta* is unenviable: as it is said in the beginning of the Kusajātaka (№ 531), before his lifetime expires, a *devaputta*’s appearance starts to change: “*devaputtas*, who are destined to fall from *devaloka*, manifest

<sup>13</sup> *devānañhi añke nibbattā purisā devaputtā nāma, itthiyo devadhītaro nāma honti. Nānavasena apākaṭṭhāva “aññatarā devatā”ti vuccati, pākaṭṭho “itthannāmo devaputto”ti* (CST4 Tipiṭaka. L. 219079-81).

<sup>14</sup> «DEVAPUTTO, A deva...The inhabitants of the Devaloka are called *deva*, but the sing. *devo* occurs but very rarely. In its place *devatā* is used, or, if it is intended to particularize sex, *devaputto* and *devadhītā*. *Devaputto* therefore means simply a male *deva*...” (Childers 1875: 115). In the most recent Pāli dictionary Margaret Cone defines *devaputta* as “a male divinity” (Cone 2010: 437).

five evil signs: their garlands wither, their robes get soiled, their bodies become ugly, perspiration pours from their armpits, and a *deva* no longer finds pleasure in his heavenly seat” (Kh, Jātakapāli 20.1; CST4. L. 790010-13). In the post-canonical Milindapañha we find the description of feelings experienced by an average *devaputta* who is destined to be reborn soon on earth or even in a lower world. The Indo-Greek king Milinda, identified by many scholars with the historical king Menander (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), on his way to meet the Buddhist sage Nāgasena, whom he hopes to defeat in a philosophical dispute, sees from a distance the open hall in which the dispute is to take place and where Nāgasena is seated with the innumerable company or the brethren. Suddenly the king feels a strange fear, paralyzing horror – “like a *devaputta* whose lifetime [in heaven] has ended» (*parikkhīnāyyuko viya devaputto*; Milindapañho 1880: 1.14: cf. The Questions of King Milinda 1890: 37-38). Some parallels may be found in the Sanskrit Mbh: epic heroes and kings, as well as ṛṣis and great ascetics, having obtained heaven after death, stay there as long as their religious merit (*punya*) or their heroic fame (*kīrti*) lasts. A classical example is the story of king Yayāti (Mbh 1, 83-85) who enjoyed all the pleasures of heavenly paradise for many thousand years, but when his merit was spent and lost, Indra said to him: “Your merit gone, you shall fall today, king!”<sup>15</sup> (translation by J.A.B. van Buitenen [Mahābhārata 1973: 198]).

However a happier lot awaits, according to Tipiṭaka, some chosen, religiously minded *devaputtas*, who were not pleasure seekers but practiced Buddhist meditation and consequently are able to move upwards in order to reach the world, from which it is possible to leave the saṃsāric universe. Thus the generous donor of the Buddha, Anāthapiṇḍika, who was reborn after death as a *devaputta* in the *devaloka* (M 10.5; CST4. L. 207813), became there a *sotāpanna* (“one who has entered the stream”), i.e. stepped on the irreversible path to *nibbāna*.

Lastly, there is one more variant of a *devaputta*’s future, of special interest to us in the context of this paper. Nāgasena says

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<sup>15</sup> *kṣīṇe punye patitāsy adya rājan* (Mbh 1, 83.3d).

to king Milinda that if there is among humans a family, wealthy, virtuous, pious, of good conduct, practising morality, but childless (“having no son” – *aputtakam*), and if at the same time there is a *devaputta* in the world of the gods, having strong roots of goodness, but doomed to fall (*cavanadhammo*), then Sakka, king of the gods, out of compassion for this family usually asks the *devaputta* to enter the womb of the head wife in that household (Kh 45.4.1.7; CST4. L. 915860-62). Nāgasena provides three examples: the births of “young Sāma” (*sāmo kumāro*), of king Mahāpanāda and of king Kusa (CST4. L. 915860-62).<sup>16</sup> In the first case Sakka had compassion for a couple of young ascetics, Dukūlaka and Pārikā,<sup>17</sup> because he foresaw that they both would soon lose their sight. Sakka advised them to give birth to a son who could take care of them, but they shrank in disgust even from the thought of breaking their ascetic chastity. So Sakka obtained their consent for a miraculous birth. At a proper moment king of the gods told Dukūlaka to touch Pārikā’s navel with his hand, and immediately the *Bodhisatta* (it was the Buddha in one of his former births) entered the womb of Pārikā (*Sāmajātaka*, № 540; *Jātaka* 1895-1907: VI. 52-53), at the request of Sakka, as we know.

In another story, implied by Nāgasena, king Suruci of Mithilā and his only queen Sumedhā, having lived together for ten thousand years, remain childless. Sakka, out of compassion for them, approaches the *devaputta* Naḷākara (who was born in the world of Thirty Three as a reward for his service to *paccekabuddhas* in his earthly life) and asks him to take birth in the world of humans. However Naḷākara is not “doomed to fall” as a *devaputta* from the story of the “Young Sāma”: for him the world of men is hateful and loathsome, he is going to reach the highest of the *devalokas*. Still Sakka manages to persuade him.

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<sup>16</sup> «Thrice, *mahārāja*, *devaputtas* at the request of Sakka, king of the gods, took birth in the families (on earth). Who were these three (newborn sons)? Young Sāma, Mahāpanāda and king Kusa. All three were *Bodhisattas*” (*Tayome, mahārāja, devaputtā sakkena devānamindena āyācitā kulaṃ uppannā. Katame tayo? Sāmo kumāro mahāpanādo kusarājā, tayopete bodhisattā*”ti).

<sup>17</sup> In their former births they both lived in the world of Brahmā.

And soon the *devaputta* Naḷākara enters the womb of the queen Sumedhā to be reborn as Mahāpanāda, in future – the great king, who will perform many deeds of piety and charity, and after death will go to the *devaloka* (Surucijātaka, № 489: Jātaka 1895-1907: IV.314-25).

The third figure mentioned by Nāgasena is king Kusa, born in a similar miraculous way. The childless couple in this case was Okkāka, king of the Mallas, and his chief queen Sīlavatī. Again it was Sakka who came to their aid. Among *devaputtas* in the world of the gods he saw the Bodhisattva who, having passed through his existence in the heaven of the Thirty-three, was longing to be born in a higher world. But when Sakka ordered him to take birth in the world, he consented. Eventually Sakka merely touched the queen's body with his thumb, and at that moment the Bodhisattva was conceived in her womb. She gave birth to a boy who was named Kusa, in future – a great king. And it was one of the former births of the Buddha (Kusajātaka: Jātaka 1895-1907: V. 141-145, 164).

It is worthy of note that out of the three *devaputtas* featuring in these three stories two were reborn in royal families (stories of Mahāpanāda and Kusa), and the parents of “Young Sāma” were children of two “hunter chiefs” (i.e. tribal chieftains?).

In addition we may refer to the beginning of the Milindapañha, its Bāhirakathā (Kh 45.1; CST4. L. 912145ff), where Thera Assagupta comes to the world of the Thirty Three and tells Sakka that on earth there appeared king Milinda, a zealous opponent of Buddhism, an invincible disputant who had already done great harm to the Order and to the spreading of the Buddha's teaching. Sakka then says to him: “This king Milinda, venerable one, left this world and was born in the world of man.<sup>18</sup> And now there dwells in the mansion Ketumatī a *devaputta*, Mahāsena by name, who is able to hold converse with him and to resolve his doubts. We shall ask that *devaputta* to be reborn in the world of men”. However Mahāsena is not happy at all with Indra's proposal: “I have no desire, venerable Sir, for the world of men...Hard is life as a man. It is here, Sir,

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<sup>18</sup> *milindo rājā ito cuto manussesu uppanno.*



in the world of the gods that, being reborn in ever higher and higher spheres, I hope to pass away!” But Assaguṭṭa explains to Mahāseṇa that he has to fulfill a vitally important mission on earth: to refute the heresy of Milinda and to lend to the religion of the Buddha his powerful aid. After that the *devaputta* agrees to leave the *devaloka* and to be born in the world of men as Nāgasena. It is clear from the words of Sakka to Assaguṭṭa that king Milinda, too, had existed before his birth in the Yāvana royal family in the world of the Thirty Three gods (Milindapañho 1880: 6), most probably – as a *devaputta*.

It is impossible not to mention here the descent of the highest of *devaputras* – Śvetaketu Boddhisattva, as he is called in the Lalitavistara – from the Tuṣita heaven (or from the world of Indra – Kern 1896: 13) to the earth where he entered the womb of the queen of the Śakyas, Māyā.

This descent of the Buddhist *devaputtas* from heavenly paradise to be born mostly in royal (i.e. *kṣatriya*) families on earth strongly resembles the pre-Buddhist, archaic Indo-Aryan notion of *devaputra* as a demigod, “son of god”, sent from the paradise in heaven to be born on earth as an epic hero whose mission was to fight the evil. The similarity increases when we realize that in all cases the highest authority who asks or orders a *devaputta* to descend is Sakka, ruler of the World of Thirty Three, i.e. pre-Buddhist Śakra / Indra, ruler of *svarga*, the heavenly paradise for *devaputras*, heroes fallen in battle.

On the basis of the Buddhist sources we it can be argued that the notion of *devaputta* was well known at least in the third century BCE when the Canon was fixed (orally) for the first time. The earliest written evidence of the usage of the term *devaputra* in a Buddhist context is in the inscription that explains the contents of the relief on one of the columns of the Bharhut stupa. The inscription was first published by A. Cunningham, but the correct reading was done later by other scholars. It runs as follows: «Devaputa (= *devaputta*) Araḥaguta (=Arhadgupta), having come down (from heaven), announces to the Great Assembly of the conception of the Bhagavan (i.e. the future Buddha)» (Lévi 1934: 14). That means that the term *devaputra* / *devaputta* was referred to the inhabitants of heavens

as early as in the second century BCE. But the material analyzed above gives us some ground to suggest that the concept of *devaputra* / *devaputta* has been an element of the Buddhist world view since the time of its formation. i.e. since the Buddha's time. Strictly speaking, the mythological idea of *devaputra* / *devaputta* in early Buddhism seems to be a legacy of pre-Buddhist and even pre-Vedic archaic world view.

As already mentioned, the idea of the true hero as *devaputra*, a demigod who steps down from heaven to perform a heroic deed and then returns to the world of the gods, was inherent in the kṣatriyan, warrior's world view. It needs to be taken into account that two great unorthodox Indian religions, Buddhism and Jainism, were born in the regions where political power was in the hands of the kṣatriyan nobility, where the Brahmans did not have monopoly on performing rituals and where the culture as a whole retained various features of the Indo-Aryan pre-Vedic archaic lore. We know that Buddhists and Jainas established their monastic orders in the image of ancient warrior communities and borrowed from them their basic terms, such as *saṅgha*, *gaṇa* and *arhat* / *arahant* (Choudhary 1964: 29; Bollée 1981: 178, 184; Falk 1986: 64; 104f; Neri 2015: 409-412). For the same reason, it can be suggested, Sakka's world of *devaputtas* in the Buddhist mythological world view, came to resemble Śakra's warrior paradise of the archaic mythology of Indo-Aryans, in which *devaputra* heroes abide in bliss.

In support of my suggestion concerning the continuity between pre-Buddhist kṣatriyan and Buddhist religious concepts of *devaputra* / *devaputta*, it is expedient to quote one more passages from the Pāli Canon, which demonstrate that the semantic link between the words *vīra* "hero" and *devaputra*, which we found in the Mbh (e.g. 5, 48. 35: *vīrān devaputrān*), exists in the language of the Buddhist texts too. In the Ambaṭṭhasutta (D 2.3) there is a list of 32 marks characteristic of a "great man" (*mahāpurisa*). In particular, a great man must have "more than a thousand sons, brave, with the bodies like those of heroes" (*vīraṅgarūpā*: D.2.3; CST4. L. 11966). The commentary to this sutta (Ambaṭṭhasuttavaṇṇanā) explains: *vīraṅgarūpāti devaputtasadisakāyā* "Bodies like those of

heroes' – bodies similar to those of *devaputtas*" (D 1.3; CST4. L. 6364).

### 3. Devaputra as a royal title.

We are now left with the issue of the origin and semantics of the term *devaputra* as a royal title.

As already mentioned, S. Lévi maintained that since the term *devaputra* had not occurred in the Indian royal titles before the Kuṣānas, it was most probably the Kuṣānas who had brought the idea from their homeland which bordered on China, whereas the term itself had been borrowed from the similar Chinese title 'son of heaven'. Today, eighty years after S. Lévi's paper was published, we have in our disposal plenty of historical material which renders S. Lévi's conclusions open to doubt.

Firstly, this idea had very deep roots in the Indian culture itself. The view that in the course of the ritual of royal consecration (*abhiṣeka*) the gods Indra and Varuṇa became embodied in the king, is indeed very old. E.g., in the Rigveda hymn 4, 42, king Trasadasyu, at the moment of his royal consecration, proclaims himself identical with Indra and Varuṇa. In the additional verses it is said that he was sent by these gods to his mother to be born as *ardhadeva*, a demigod (Schmidt 1992). Trasadasyu is probably the first epic hero in Indian history because the Tale of the Battle with the Ten Kings, which he won, has been convincingly reinterpreted by M. Witzel (2005) as a prototype of the Mahābhārata.

There are also all Buddhist stories of *devaputtas* descending from heaven to be reborn in the royal families, including those of the Buddha Śakyamuni and of king Milinda (see above in the previous part of this paper).

Even if the old Indian idea was over time forgotten, it must have been revitalized in India long before the Kuṣānas, with the coming of the Greeks and Iranians. After the rule of Alexander the Great, deification of a king had become common in the Seleucid and the Parthian empires where such royal titles as *Ἐπιφανής* «manifest/embodied [god]», *θεοπατορ* «having god

as his father», i.e. «son of god» were used. The Bactrian Greeks who came to power in North India in the early second century BCE had brought with them a set of royal titles, including 'Επιφανής «the embodied [god]», which was followed on coins by its Prakrit rendering: *pracacha* (Skt *pratyakṣa*). By that time the Kuṣānas had ousted the Greeks from Bactria and began to move on gradually from a nomadic to a civilized, Hellenistic way of life. It was from Bactrians and Parthians that they had borrowed their royal epithets. The title *devaputra* appears first on the coins of the Kuṣāna king Kujula Kadphises. A. Maricq saw in this title an adaptation of the Greek *theopatōr* used by the Parthians (Maricq 1958: 378-382); H. Falk throws doubt on this Iranian link and considers a direct adaptation of Latin *divi filius* used by Augustus much more probable (Falk 2010: 77-78). Kujula's great-grandson, emperor Kanishka named himself in his Great Surhkotal inscription in the Bactrian language *bago šao* «god-king» and *šao bagopouro* «king, son of god». This title of Bactrian kings could also be transformed on Indian soil into *devaputra*. In any case, the western (Hellenistic, Iranian, Roman) origin of the Kuṣāna royal title *devaputra* appears more plausible than its link with the far-off Chinese "son of heaven".

S. Lévi quoted in his paper Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese texts of an episode from the Suvarṇaprabhāsaśūtra in which the Four Guardians of the World (*lokapālas*) ask the god Brahmā: «Why is the king, born among humans, called «a god» (*deva*)? And why is the king called *devaputra*?». Brahmā answers: «Blessed by the indras of gods, he (the king) enters into the mother's womb. First the gods enter into him, then he finds himself in the womb. Having taken birth in the world of men, he becomes their king; but, since he was born from the gods, he is called *devaputra*» (Lévi 1934: 3-4).

S. Lévi was inclined to think that these verses of the Suvarṇaprabhāsa had been composed with the aim to provide the new royal title *devaputra* introduced by the Kuṣāna rulers with a mythological foundation. However, the verses (*gāthās*) of the Suvarṇaprabhāsaśūtra containing the conversation of the Four Guardians with Brahmā cannot be dated earlier than the fourth century CE, when the empire of the Kuṣānas had ceased

to exist. After all, what is said in these verses has numerous links with the earlier Indian concepts, especially with the idea of divinity of the king, of his birth from the gods, the idea which has always been present in every Indian rite of royal consecration.

As for the Kuṣāṇa royal title *devaputra*, it seems, it was merely a result of a substitution of a foreign title, be it *divi filius* or *bagopouro*, with the local term and the concept known since the earliest times.

The conclusion: a term for a Sanskrit epic hero, a designation for a celestial being in the Buddhist literature and a Kuṣāṇa royal title – all three are semantically connected and have sprung from the same mythological source.

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## Abbreviations

A	Aṅguttaranikāya
CST4	Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipitaka Version 4.0 ( <a href="http://www.tipitaka.org/cst4">http://www.tipitaka.org/cst4</a> )
D	Dīghanikāya
Dhp-a	Dhammapadāṭṭhakathā
Kh	Khuddakanikāya
L.	line or lines in CST4.
M	Majjhimanikāya

- Mbh *The Mahābhārata*. 1933 – 1966. Critically edited by V. Sukthankar and others. 19 vols. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- Rām. *Rāmāyaṇa*. 2011 – 2014. An electronic text of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, consisting of John Smith’s revision of Prof. Muneo Tokunaga’s version of the text.  
<http://bombay.indology.info/ramayana/statement.html>
- S Saṃyuttanikāya

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