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CANDRAGUPTA MAURYA AND HIS IMPORTANCE  
FOR INDIAN HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

Professor Bhargava published his book on Candragupta Maurya (*Chandragupta Maurya: A gem of Indian history*) in 1935, at the young age of 26 years. He finished the second revised and enlarged edition of this book 60 years later, in 1995, when he was 86 years old; it came out the next year, in 1996.

In this paper I propose to discuss in what light Candragupta Maurya appears to us today. We must not forget that Professor Bhargava's book on this ruler came out for the first time some 75 years ago, and that even its revised and enlarged edition, itself more than 15 years old, does not quite present the picture that is now slowly emerging.

Who was Candragupta Maurya? Put very briefly, he was the creator of the Maurya empire.<sup>2</sup> The Maurya empire, under Candragupta and his successors, united under one sceptre most of the South Asian subcontinent and some regions outside it (most notably in what today is called Afghanistan). We have direct evidence of the extent of the Maurya empire thanks to the so-called edicts of Aśoka, Candragupta's grandson. These edicts also provide us with contemporary information about Aśoka's policies and personal thoughts. They are virtually the only contemporary evidence we have on the Maurya empire. Candragupta himself left us no inscriptions, even though there are accounts from outside India, most notably the information (or what is left of it) provided by Megasthenes, the Seleucid ambas-

<sup>1</sup> This is the slightly adapted version of a paper read at the international conference "Sanskrit & History of Early India", held at the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, in December 2009 to celebrate the birth centenary of Prof. P. L. Bhargava. Parts of it have been adapted in my book *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Thapar, 2002: 174 ff.; Witzel, 2003: 78 ff.





sador who spent time in Candragupta's capital around the year 300 BCE. Apart from this, we depend on more recent sources, whose historical reliability is not always guaranteed.

Consider the following. The capital of the Maurya empire was Pāṭaliputra, a city in the eastern Ganges valley. Under the Mauryas it may have become the largest city of the ancient world.<sup>3</sup> Initially this city was much smaller, and the capital of a much smaller kingdom, Magadha. This kingdom, along with surrounding regions, I call Greater Magadha, partly because there are good reasons to think that this part of North India had a culture of its own, quite different from the Brahmanical culture that was centred to its west, in the so-called Āryāvarta.<sup>4</sup> Greater Magadha had a different culture, a culture from which religions like Buddhism and Jainism arose, and a culture in which the superiority of Brahmins and of their ideas about society and its correct organization was not taken for granted. Indeed, some of Aśoka's edicts leave no doubt that this emperor had little patience with Brahmanical sacrifices. Consider the following passage from the first Rock Edict, where Aśoka states: "Here no living being must be killed and sacrificed<sup>5</sup>". The form "must be sacrificed" – *prajūhitavyam, pajohitaviye*, etc. – is derived from the verbal root *hu* "to sacrifice, offer oblations", whose connection with the Vedic sacrifice is well-known. The first Rock Edict, then, forbids the Brahmins to carry out sacrifices in which animals are killed<sup>6</sup>. This edict, it may be recalled, was hewn into rock at at least nine different places scattered over the whole of Aśoka's empire<sup>7</sup>. The prohibition to sacrifice living beings had therefore more than mere local significance.

A passage from the ninth Rock Edict is equally interesting. This edict is positively rude about what it calls *maṅgala* "ceremonies". It says: "Men are practising various ceremonies during illness, or at the marriage of a son or a daughter, or at the birth of a son, or when setting out on a journey; on these and other (occasions) men are practising various ceremonies. But in such (cases) women are

<sup>3</sup> Schlingloff, 1969: 29 f.

<sup>4</sup> See Bronkhorst, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Tr. Hultzsch, 1925: 2; cp. Bloch, 1950: 91; Schneider, 1978: 21.

<sup>6</sup> On the killing of animals, including cows, in Vedic sacrifices, see Jha, 2002: 27 f.

<sup>7</sup> See Falk, 2006: 111-138.





practising many and various vulgar and useless ceremonies. Now, ceremonies should certainly be practised. But ceremonies like these bear little fruit indeed”<sup>8</sup>. Aśoka recommends *dhamma-maṅgala* “Dharma ceremonies” instead. We are at present more interested in what he rejects. A glance at the Dharma-sūtras and other traditional texts will make clear that the Brahmins were masters of such kinds of ceremonies (even though the term *maṅgala* to designate them appears to be rare in their texts)<sup>9</sup>. It seems, therefore, that Aśoka’s ninth Rock Edict is criticizing certain Brahmanical customs, or *also* Brahmanical customs, without saying so explicitly.

It will come as no surprise that there is no trace in the edicts that Aśoka followed Brahmanical advice in ruling his empire. We know that Aśoka’s personal leanings were toward Buddhism, and tradition testifies to the fact that all the other rulers of the Maurya empire had strong links with Jainism, sometimes Ajivikism, but never with Brahmanism. A persistent tradition maintains that Candragupta was a Jaina.

Aśoka’s lack of interest for Brahmins and their ideas is further confirmed by the fact that his edicts never mention the Brahmanical fourfold division of society. They never mention Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras, nor indeed the word *varṇa* in the sense of caste-class. We must assume that the vision of society that the Brahmins promoted was not accepted by Aśoka, nor by the majority of his subjects.

The picture that is slowly gaining ground in modern research is that the establishment of the Maurya empire spelt disaster for traditional Brahmanism. Brahmins in earlier days performed rituals at the courts of kings in the Brahmanical heartland. This Brahmanical heartland was conquered by rulers from Pāṭaliputra, who had no respect for Brahmanical rituals and needed no Brahmins at their courts. This incorporation into a larger empire, first presumably by the Nandas, then by the Mauryas, took away all the respect and privileges that Brahmins had so far enjoyed, and might have meant the disappearance of Brahmins as a distinct group of people. The reason

<sup>8</sup> Tr. Hultsch, 1925: 16-17; cp. Bloch, 1950: 113-114; Schneider, 1978: 52-54.

<sup>9</sup> Note that Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita* (1.83) enumerates *maṅgala* along with *japa* and *homa* in a compound which clearly refers to Brahmanical practices. *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 11.17 enumerates *maṅgala* along with *śānti* and *abhicāra* (*śānti... maṅgalasamyuktāny ābhuyāyikāni... [a]bhicāra... yuktāni ca... kuryāt*); these latter terms are sometimes associated with the Atharvan ritual (Bloomfield, 1899: 8, 25).





why this did not happen is that Brahmanism reinvented itself. Deprived of their earlier privileges, Brahmins made an effort to find new ways to make themselves indispensable for rulers, and to gain the respect of others.

Late Vedic literature suggests that Brahmins, already in the good old days, had the custom of travelling around and offering their services to kings who needed them for this or that specific ritual event. From time to time they participated in competitive encounters with other Brahmins at a royal court, and occasionally the king himself might show an understanding of the Vedic sacrifice on a par with that of the Brahmins. Those good old days did not last, and we have already seen that the imperial unification of northern India by rulers from Magadha, far from the Vedic heartland, probably accelerated the decline. Travelling Brahmins were henceforth likely to be faced with a diminished demand for their habitual services, especially outside the Vedic heartland. What they did in response was broadening the range of services they offered. They were still willing to carry out elaborate solemn Vedic sacrifices in the service of the king, but they also made a point of acquiring the skills required to counsel kings in the more practical arts of statecraft and governing; we may assume that this was no more than an extension of what they had done before. Being in essence priests, they further used their familiarity with the supernatural to predict people's future, interpret signs, pronounce curses or blessings where needed, and other such things<sup>10</sup>. And wherever they went, and whatever they did, they always made the claim that they, the Brahmins, were entitled to the

<sup>10</sup> Brian Black, in the Conclusion of his study of the early Upaniṣads (2007: 171), observes: "the early Upaniṣads strongly criticize the sacrifice and focus on other activities as the practices which most give knowledge authority. This movement away from sacrifice at a textual level indicates that the composers and editors of the Upaniṣads were attempting to define their roles as Brahmins in different ways to audiences who no longer found the sacrifice favorable. In fact, not only do Brahmins define themselves as teachers and court priests rather than as ritualists, but also the ideal king is one who learns philosophy and hosts philosophical debates rather than one who is the patron of the sacrifice." *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.1 contains an enumeration of Brahmanical skills containing, in Olivelle's interpretation, the following items: Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, Atharvaveda, the corpus of histories and ancient tales, ancestral rites, mathematics, soothsaying, the art of locating treasures, dialogues, monologues, the science of gods, the science of the ritual, the science of spirits, the science of government, the science of heavenly bodies, and the science of serpent beings.





highest position in society<sup>11</sup>, and disposed of great but secret powers which enabled them to impose their will in case that were to be necessary. These claims further encompassed an elaborate vision of society in which there are fundamentally four caste-classes (*varṇa*). In descending order these were the Brahmins, the Kṣatriyas (primarily kings), the Vaiśyas (merchants etc.), and at the bottom the Śūdras<sup>12</sup>.

The transformation of Brahmanism I have been discussing has left a number of literary traces. *Mahābhārata* scholars are coming to agree that the *Mahābhārata* as we know it was given something approximating its present form – wholly or in large part – during the last few centuries preceding the Common Era, most probably after the decline and fall of the Maurya Empire, with the intention of establishing Brahmanical ideology and supremacy<sup>13</sup>. The same might be said of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Other kinds of texts, such as the Dharma Sūtras, perhaps also Gṛhya Sūtras, and of course the handbook for statecraft, the *Arthaśāstra*, can also be looked upon as the literary expression of this transformation.

Before I return to Candragupta Maurya, let me remind you that this transformation of Brahmanism had, in the course of time, momentous consequences. One thousand years after Candragupta and Aśoka, that is one thousand years after the political events that might have eradicated Brahmanism, it had become the dominant socio-political ideology in a vast area, stretching from Kashmir to Vietnam and Java in Indonesia. The spread of Brahmanism is a phenomenon of gigantic proportions and significance, which has yet received very little serious academic interest. It is all the more remarkable in that this ideology, unlike Christianity, was not imposed by an empire and, unlike Islam, was not imposed by military conquest. It did not even owe its expansion to religious missionaries.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. MN II p. 84: “The Brahmins say thus: ‘Brahmins are the highest caste-class (*vaṇṇa*, Skt. *varṇa*), those of any other caste-class are inferior; Brahmins are the fairest caste-class, those of any other caste-class are dark; only Brahmins are purified, not non-Brahmins; Brahmins alone are the sons of Brahmā, the offspring of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’” (tr. Nāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995: 698)

<sup>12</sup> This social division was not yet all that rigorous even in late Vedic days; see Rau, 1957: 62 f. Staal (2008: 59) thinks that the Puruṣa myth, which mentions these four caste-classes, is a late addition to the Ṛgveda.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Fitzgerald, 2004: 114 ff.





This remarkable success of Brahmanism was still centuries away at the time of Candragupta Maurya. There is a tradition that claims that Candragupta owed most of his successes to a Brahmanical minister, whose name is variously given as Kauṭilya, Kauṭalya, and Cāṇakya. This same Kauṭilya (I will stick to this name) is reported to have composed the *Arthaśāstra*, the treatise of politics that has been compared to Machiavelli's *Il Principe*.<sup>14</sup> The *Arthaśāstra* gives detailed indications as to the way in which a state should be run, and there can be no doubt that its advice has been taken to heart by numerous rulers over the centuries.

If it is true that Candragupta and the empire he established spelt disaster for Brahmanism, if it is further true that neither Candragupta nor any of his successors had any interest in Brahmanism, how then is it possible to believe that this very empire was created by a Brahmin, Candragupta's minister Kauṭilya? It is possible to believe *either* that the Maurya empire was a disaster for traditional Brahmanism *or* that it was created by a Brahmin, but very difficult to believe both at the same time.

I touch here the central point of my article. Can we use the *Arthaśāstra* as evidence to find out more about the way Candragupta organized his empire? And is it true that the Maurya empire was created with the indispensable help of a Brahmin minister?

I think it is important to keep these two questions apart. Theoretically, it is conceivable that the Maurya empire was created with the help of a Brahmin minister, who was yet not the author of the *Arthaśāstra*. It is equally conceivable that the *Arthaśāstra* can justifiably be used to find out more about the way Candragupta organized his empire, without believing that this text, or the whole of it, was composed by a Brahmin.

I begin with the tradition which claims that Candragupta had a Brahmanical minister, Kauṭilya (or whatever else his name may have been), who was instrumental in creating the Maurya empire. Scholars have pointed out that the earliest sources do not mention him, and that the sources that do mention him are separated from

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<sup>14</sup> Strictly speaking, as Trautmann (1971: 10) points out, Cāṇakya is the name of the person who figures in the legend, and Kauṭilya the name attributed to the author of the *Arthaśāstra*.





the times to which they refer by many centuries<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the Brahmanical tradition raises the political skills of Kauṭilya to such a level that there was little for Candragupta to do but follow the advice of his minister. The Maurya empire, in short, was created by a Brahmin minister for his king, even though the king was not interested in Brahmanism. The propagandistic value of this story can easily be appreciated. Future rulers who heard it were reminded of the importance of finding a suitable Brahmanical counsellor. In other words, there is a priori little reason to accept this tradition at its face value, and a good deal of reason to suspect that it was invented for propagandistic purposes. It seems advisable to remain wary with regard to the legend of Kauṭilya.

Let us therefore forget Kauṭilya, at least for the time being, and turn to the text of the *Arthaśāstra*. This text has intrigued scholars since its first modern publication, and attempts have been made to find out whether it is a unitary text, and whether anything sensible can be said about its date of composition.

Regarding the unitary nature of the text, the following observations can be made. The *Arthaśāstra* consists of verses and prose. Hartmut Scharfe (1968) has shown that at least two persons left their traces in the composition of this work, one of whom wrote in verse, the other one in prose. Scharfe adduces several arguments in support of this, among them the fact that the contents of the verses do not always agree with those of the prose. The verse text, moreover, calls its author Kauṭilya in the very beginning and states that he tore away the land of the Nandas at the very end, while the prose text calls itself a compilation in the first line and its author Viṣṇugupta in the last<sup>16</sup>.

The exact relationship between the portions of Kauṭilya and those of Viṣṇugupta is not clear. The concluding lines of the text state that Viṣṇugupta composed both Sūtra and Bhāṣya. What exactly is meant is again not clear. It is possible that the verses and parts of

<sup>15</sup> Bongard-Levin, 2001; Trautmann, 1971: 10-67. Willis (2009: 201 & 325 n. 163) misleadingly states that the “*Milindapañho* refers to the clash between the Nandas on one side and Candragupta and Cāṇakya on the other”, with a reference to T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, SBE, vol. 36 (Oxford, 1894): 147-48; to my knowledge the *Milindapañha* contains no such reference.

<sup>16</sup> Scharfe, 1968: 80-81. Note that the text is only ascribed to Kauṭilya in its verses, which, as convincingly argued by McClish (2009: 117; 143 ff.), constitute a later addition.





verses adopted in the prose are referred to as sūtras. This custom is adopted in some other texts known to us<sup>17</sup>.

The concluding lines of Viṣṇugupta are interesting in this context. They form a verse in āryā metre and read:

*drṣṭvā vipratipattiṃ bahudhā śāstreṣu bhāṣyakārāṇām/  
svayam eva viṣṇuguptaś cakāra sūtraṃ ca bhāṣyaṃ ca//*

The second line means, of course, that Viṣṇugupta himself made Sūtra and Bhāṣya, which does not exclude the possibility that he borrowed extensively from earlier authors, as we shall see. The first line can be interpreted in different ways. *Vipratipatti* means basically ‘opposition’ or ‘contradiction’. The line may therefore speak of the opposition of the Bhāṣyakāras against the Sūtra, or against each other. In the first case it concerns an incorrect interpretation of the Sūtra, in the second a difference of opinion among themselves. Another and at least equally important difficulty lies in the word *śāstreṣu*. Does this word refer to the books, or sciences, on which the Bhāṣyakāras wrote their Bhāṣyas? Another interpretation is possible. The whole line may be understood to speak about the opposition of the Bhāṣyakāras in the Śāstras.<sup>18</sup> This would mean that the Bhāṣyakāras were at the same time the writers of Śāstras. This is less peculiar than it seems. Viṣṇugupta describes himself in the same verse as the author of a Bhāṣya, but he is also the author of a Śāstra, the *Arthaśāstra*. A parallel case is constituted by the Yoga Bhāṣya, which calls itself – including the sūtras contained in it – Yoga Śāstra.<sup>19</sup> A Śāstra is in these cases a work which combines sūtras (or kārīkās) and Bhāṣya, a work which brings a number of elements together and unites them into one. This is exactly what Viṣṇugupta’s *Arthaśāstra* says in its first line:

*... yāvanty arthaśāstrāṇi pūrvācāryaiḥ prasthāpitāni prāyaśas  
tāni samhr̥tyaikam idam arthaśāstraṃ kṛtam*

<sup>17</sup> Among them the *Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya* and Sthiramati’s commentary on the *Madhyāntavibhāga Śāstra*.

<sup>18</sup> Falk (1986: 59, 58 n. 12) has a third interpretation: “Viṣṇugupta sah häufig einen Widerspruch in den Lehren der Kommentar-Verfasser ...”.

<sup>19</sup> A further example of this usage is constituted by the buddhist text that calls itself *Madhyāntavibhāga-kārīkā Bhāṣya*, *Madhyāntavibhāga-sūtra Bhāṣya* and *Madhyāntavibhāga Śāstra*.





This single (*eka*) [work called] *Arthaśāstra* has mainly been made by compiling all the *Arthaśāstras* produced by earlier teachers.<sup>20</sup>

This is not the place to study how many authors have contributed to the *Arthaśāstra* as we now know it. It is clear that the prose sections may contain parts which derive from various commentators preceding Viṣṇugupta. The statistical investigations of Th. R. Trautmann (1971) do indeed support multiple authorship.<sup>21</sup> It is however clear that the text in its present shape is much more recent than the time of Candragupta. Some scholars date it between the middle of the second century CE and the fourth century CE.<sup>22</sup>

One scholar, Michael Willis (2009), argues in favour of the most recent of these possible dates, i.e., the fourth century CE. He bases an argument on the fact that Kāmandaki, author of a work called *Nītisāra*, celebrates the qualities and achievements of Viṣṇugupta, Kāmandaki's master in polity and statecraft. Viṣṇugupta, you will remember, is the name of the author of the *Arthaśāstra* in its present form. Willis further argues that the opening verse of the *Nītisāra* can be understood as an oblique dedication to Candragupta II, the Gupta ruler who ruled circa CE 375-415. He concludes from this that “the archaeological and textual evidence points to a date in the mid-fourth century for the *Arthaśāstra*” (Willis, 2009: 62).<sup>23</sup> It seems ad-

<sup>20</sup> Note that *Arthaśāstra* 2.10.63 claims a similar activity for Kauṭilya: *sarvaśāstrāṇy anukramya prayogam upalabhya ca / kauṭilyena narendrārthe śāsanasya vidhiḥ kṛtaḥ //* “After going through all the *śāstras* in detail and after observing the practice (in such matters), Kauṭilya has made these rules about edicts for the sake of kings.”

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of Trautmann's methods, see Fosse, 1997: 73-82. On multiple authorship, see also Falk, 1986, esp. p. 69; Bronkhorst, 1991.

<sup>22</sup> So Willis, 2004: 57 n. 114. It dates from “the first or perhaps the second century A.D.” according to Scharfe (1993: 293). Willis himself favors the fourth century; see below.

<sup>23</sup> Willis (2009: 170) cites and translates the relevant verses of the *Nītisāra*, and it is clear from these that they can be read as indicating that Viṣṇugupta destroyed the Nandas and created an empire for Candragupta: *yasyābhicāravajreṇa vajrajvalanatejasaḥ / papāta mūlataḥ śrīmān suparvā nandaparvataḥ // ekākī mantrasaktyā yaḥ śaktyā śaktidharopamaḥ / ājahāra nṛcandrāya candraguptāya medinīm // nītiśāstrāmṛtaṃ dhīmān arth[a]śāstramahodadheḥ / samuddadhe namas tasmai viṣṇuguptāya vedhase //* “Obeisance to [that] Viṣṇugupta, whose magical spell, splendid as a flash of lightning, uprooted the foundation of the mountain-like Nanda, prosperous and powerful; who, like the weapon-bearing Kārttikeya, used his weapon of wise counsel to single-handedly secure the world for Candragupta, that prince among men; salutations to that author, who produced the nectar of *Nītiśāstra* out of the mighty ocean of *Arthaśāstra*.”





visible to remain prudent with regard to Willis's final conclusion. It yet seems clear that the *Arthaśāstra* as we now know it does not date from the time of Candragupta Maurya.

Are we at least entitled to accept the attribution of the verse text to Kauṭilya, i.e. to a minister of Candragupta Maurya? This is highly improbable. The fact that no writing was used in India at the time of Candragupta Maurya is one reason to entertain doubts.<sup>24</sup> Another one is the fact that the *Arthaśāstra* presupposes a kingdom that can be surrounded by more powerful rivals, whereas the empire of Candragupta Maurya and his successors could not be encircled.<sup>25</sup> Then there is the obvious advantage, already pointed out before, which more recent Brahmins could derive from the claim that the Maurya empire – which had not been sympathetic to them – had really been created by a Brahmin, using the methods which those more recent Brahmins promoted among the rulers that were their contemporaries.

We still have to consider the possibility that the oldest core of the *Arthaśāstra* was not composed by a Brahmin (or by Brahmins), and may therefore conceivably preserve traces of the way the Maurya empire (whether the empire of Candragupta Maurya or that of one of his successors) was organized. A doctoral dissertation recently submitted to the University of Texas at Austin, by Mark McClish (2009), is highly relevant in this context. McClish comes to the conclusion that “the ideology of Brahmanism, which promotes the political interests of the Brahmanical community, was a later addition to a text previously devoid of such concerns” (p. vi). There was, he claims (p. 317), “sometime around the turn of the millennium, a comprehensive articulation of the state (within śāstric convention) that displayed little, if any, evidence of the political interests of the Brahmanical community (the so-called ‘*prakaraṇa*-text’). And, in one major overhaul (the *adhyāya* redaction), a religious ideology had been inserted into the text sufficient to recast the entire project of statecraft as being carried out within a greater religious order.”

I find McClish's arguments on the whole convincing. We must however keep in mind that he would be the last to claim that the *prakaraṇa*-text is the original or earliest *Arthaśāstra*; it seems to

<sup>24</sup> Note that the *Arthaśāstra* (2.10 and elsewhere) is familiar with writing and scribes (*lekhaka*).

<sup>25</sup> Fussman, 1987-88: 46.





preserve traces of interpolations, even though a reconstruction of an even earlier text seems for the time being impossible. The *prakaraṇa*-text as McClish has reconstructed it, though free from evidence of the political interests of the Brahmanical community, is not altogether free from Brahmanical elements. Indeed, McClish believes (p. 310) “that it would be erroneous to draw the conclusion that the *prakaraṇa*-text of the *Arthaśāstra* is somehow anti-Brahmanical or non-Brahmanical. ... On the contrary, the text seems to assume a privileged social position for Brahmins, even though it does not address it in its policy or law. Moreover, the king’s prime minister, the *mantripurohita*, his astrologers, diviners, and many other functionaries were almost certainly Brahmins.” The *prakaraṇa*-text may well be “a text written by Brahmins and possibly also for Brahmins, at least in part” (p. 311). The fact that it was composed in Sanskrit further supports this assumption. But judging by its contents, “it doesn’t appear that *varṇadharmā* had made a very large impression on kings and states in the period in which it was composed” (p. 312).

The *prakaraṇa*-text, then, was not a text used in organizing the Maurya empire. Quite on the contrary, it is an earlier and as yet less confident Brahmanical attempt to develop a śāstra on statecraft. As such, it is an exceedingly important and interesting historical document, but not, I repeat, because it supposedly tells us something about the Maurya empire: it does not.<sup>26</sup> It does on the other hand provide us with information about the early development of Brahmanism as a socio-political ideology, a topic that deserves more attention than can be given to it in this paper<sup>27</sup>.

The *Arthaśāstra*, then, may not be a reliable source for finding out the way in which Candragupta’s empire was run. If my earlier reflections are right, it is rather an expression of the Brahmanical reaction against the political changes his empire had brought about. It

<sup>26</sup> In McClish’s words (p. 315 n. 472): “[W]hat we have in the *Arthaśāstra* is not a description, nor even an idealization, of any given historical state. It is a set of intertwined, exhaustive refractions of the state within the contours of śāstric priorities.” McClish finishes his study with the following cautious words (p. 328): “Whether any part of [the *Arthaśāstra*] may be used for the Mauryan period is as yet unclear. Considerations for dating the *prakaraṇa*-text certainly deserve their own study once the character of its composition is known more clearly.”

<sup>27</sup> See now Olivelle, 2013: 6-38 on the date and authorship of the *Arthaśāstra*.





was because of the Maurya empire that Brahmanism had to reinvent itself. It was because of that empire that Brahmanism transformed itself from a ritual tradition linked to local rulers in a relatively restricted part of India into a socio-political ideology that succeeded in imposing itself on vast parts of South and Southeast Asia, together covering an area larger than the Roman empire ever had.

If, then, the *Arthaśāstra* is not a reliable source of information for Candragupta Maurya and his empire, are there other sources that are more reliable? There are, and a particularly important one is the testimony left by Megasthenes, a Greek visitor who spent time at the court of Candragupta Maurya, in Pāṭaliputra. Megasthenes was an ambassador of king Seleucus, and wrote a book containing his observations on India, fragments of which have survived in the works of other Greek authors. We will see that the picture we can derive from this text agrees in a crucial respect with the picture I have presented so far.

The no doubt most puzzling feature of the testimony left by Megasthenes is his account of Indian society as being composed of seven classes, viz., the philosophers, farmers, shepherds and hunters, artisans and tradesmen, warriors, inspectors, and advisers and councillors. Numerous modern scholars have racked their brains trying to make sense of this enumeration. A number of them have tried to bring this list in agreement with the traditional Brahmanical division of society into four *varṇas*, others, in desperation, have claimed that Megasthenes imposed categories that he had brought from Egypt or somewhere else.<sup>28</sup> No one seems to have stated what seems now obvious, viz. that Megasthenes spent time in Magadha during a period when this region had not yet been brahmanized. Megasthenes' puzzling enumeration constitutes in this way a striking confirmation of the observation made at the beginning of this article, viz., that the region of Magadha had not been brahmanized at the time of Candragupta. Let me remind you that brahmanization means, first of all, the imposition of the Brahmanical vision of society, typically into four *varṇas*. In Magadha, at the time of Candragupta, people did not think of themselves as being hierarchically organized in this particular manner, just as people of the same region had not thought of

<sup>28</sup> See Karttunen, 1997: 82-87.





themselves in that manner at the time of the Buddha. Indeed, at the time of Candragupta, the brahmanization of society still belonged to a distant future.

We see, then, that the new picture of Candragupta and his empire that is emerging is not quite the same as the one cherished by tradition. There can be little doubt that Candragupta's impact on the history of India was momentous. But it was not momentous for the reasons often thought. It was momentous because his empire constituted the greatest threat the Vedic Brahmanical tradition had yet seen. It put Brahmanism before the choice of either perishing or reinventing itself. Somehow Brahmanism reinvented itself. The consequences of the change have had a major impact on the course of human history in large parts of Asia right until today.

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