

ALEXANDER'S DIALOGUE WITH INDIAN PHILOSOPHERS:
RIDDLE IN GREEK AND INDIAN TRADITION*

By

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the Cynic origin of Alexander and gymnosophists' dialogue and to suggest Indian sources of this episode, as well as to solve the problem by giving examples of similar questions or riddles in the ancient Greek literature as well as in the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and Indian epic.

Alexander's encounter with naked philosophers is one of the most popular motifs in his legend. This story has been frequently rewritten throughout Late Antiquity and Middle Ages probably because of its oriental undertone and anecdotal character. The meeting is described in some versions of the *Alexander Romance*, as well as in *Papyrus Berolinensis* 13044; Plutarch, *Alexander* 64; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VI 4, 38; *Epitome Mettensis* 78–84 ff.; *Anecdota Graeca* I 145 f. ed. BOISSONADE; and Julius Valerius III 11.

There are two traditional stories of Alexander's encounter with the Indian sages. According to the most popular of them, Onesicritus when sent by Alexander, has met a group of fifteen philosophers – among them Mandanis (later called Dindimus) and Calanus¹ (accounts of Onesicritus², Aristobulus³ and Nearchus⁴ in Strabo, also in Plutarch and Arrian). The other one shows Alexander asking questions to a group of *gymnosophistai*, in order to punish them for their revolt against him (Plut. *Alex.* 64). Alexander gives them a series of *aporiai* – questions with difficult and ambiguous answers. The earliest record documenting

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¹ See PEARSON 1960: 96–98; WINIARCZYK 2009.

² JACOBY 1929: 732–736 (F 134).

³ JACOBY 1929: 769–799 (F 139).

⁴ JACOBY 1929: 677–723 (F 133).

Alexander's meeting with the Indian philosophers is a "fragmentary papyrus (Pap. Berol. 13044) containing series of questions asked by Alexander to the philosophers, the content which appears as part of a more substantial narrative in the *Alexander Romance* (III.6) and Plutarch's *Alexander* (64). The further development of the encounter, where the leader of the philosophers lectures Alexander at length on their way of life, appears in the later part of the *Alexander Romance*, but at much length in a work partially preserved on a papyrus of the mid-second century AD, in which it appears as one of a collection of Cynic diatribes"⁵ (*P. Genev. Inv.* 271).

The riddle-dialogue between Alexander and gymnosophists is usually considered to be the Cynic diatribe, mostly because of some similarities between Indian gymnosophists and Cynic philosophers pointed out by U. WILCKEN in his influential paper *Alexander der Grosse und die indischen Gymnosophisten*⁶. That point of view is no longer unconditionally accepted. Some authors⁷ point out that perhaps this encounter is not simply a Cynic in origin but that it may also contain some Indian material.

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider this "Cynic" point of view and present some Indian dialogues which may have inspired the original account of the famous encounter between Alexander and Indian philosophers.

1. VERSIONS OF THE DIALOGUE/VARIANTS OF QUESTIONS

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there are seven basic versions of Alexander's dialogue with the philosophers⁸.

Plut. *Alex.* 64, 1

[Alexander] captured ten of the Gymnosophists who had done most to get Sabbas to revolt, and had made the most trouble for the Macedonians. These philosophers were reputed to be clever and concise in answering questions, and Alexander therefore put difficult questions to them, declaring that he would put to death him who first made an incorrect answer, and then the rest, in an order determined in like manner; and he commanded one of them, the oldest, to be judge in the contest.

⁵ STONEMAN 2003: 334.

⁶ WILCKEN 1923.

⁷ SAYRE 1938; DUMÉZIL 1976; STONEMAN 1995 and 2008; MAGNONE 2001; BOSMAN 2010.

⁸ The translations below follow those by STONEMAN 1991; PERRIN 1919; ROBERTS, DONALDSON 1883. The *Pap. Berol.* 13044, *Metz Epitome*, *Anecdota Graeca* and Iulius Valerius versions of the dialogue are quoted in the author's translations. All translations are based on the original texts as given in BRELOER, BÖMER 1939.

I

Plut. *Alex.* 64

The first one, accordingly, being asked which, in his opinion, were more numerous, the living or the dead, said that the living were, since the dead no longer existed.

Pap. Berol. 13044

Which is the most numerous, the living or the dead? “The living, for it is not correct to claim that those who are not would be more than those who are”.

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

The first, then, being asked, whether he thought that the living were more in number than the dead, said, “The living; for that the dead were not”.

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked which were more numerous, the living or the dead. The Indian replied, “The living for the others are nothing and nothing cannot be counted”.

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the first one, whether he thought that the living were more numerous or the dead, he said, “It is necessary that those who are, are more numerous than those who are not”.

Hist. Alex. Magni

He asked then: “Do you have no graves?” They replied: “Here is the place where we dwell...” [corrupted].

Iul. Val.

The Macedonian decided to talk to them, so he [asked] where these human beings had their graves. And their response was that they had their homes in the same place as their graves; there they have a place to stay, to sleep, to peacefully await their death, because they find it to be their place to live as well as to die.

II

Plut. *Alex.*

The second, being asked whether the earth or the sea produced larger animals, said the earth did, since the sea was but a part of the earth.

Pap. Berol. 13044

After that, he asked which was larger, the land or the sea: “The land (he answered), because the sea lies on the land”.

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

The second, on being asked whether the sea or the land maintained larger beasts, said, “The land; for the sea was part of it”.

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked whether there were more creatures on land or in the sea. The Indian replied, “On the land, for the land contains the very sea itself”.

Anecd. Graec.

[He asked] the second whether the land or the sea maintain more beasts? He said: “The land, because the land lays over the sea”.

Hist. Alex. Magni

“Who are greater in number” he asked next, “the living or the dead?”. “The dead are more numerous” they replied, “but because they no longer exist, they cannot be counted. The visible are more numerous than the invisible”.

Iul. Val.

He asked the next which, in his opinion, were more numerous: the living or the dead. And his answer was that the dead were more numerous, because they could not be counted, because they did not exist; it can be said that, for certain, those who cannot be seen, cannot be considered either.

III

Plut. *Alex.*

The third, being asked what animal was most cunning, said: “That which up to this time man has not discovered”.

Pap. Berol. 13044

He asked the third: who was the most cunning of all the creatures? He replied “I don’t know [a creature] more cunning than a man”.

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

And the third being asked which was the most cunning of animals?, [answered] “The one which has not hitherto been known, man”.

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked, which was the wisest of the animals. The Indian replied, “That which no man has ever discovered”.

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the third: “Who is the most cunning of all living creatures”. He replied, “I don’t know any but a man”.

Hist. Alex. Magni

He asked the next: “Which is stronger, death or life?” “Life” he replied, “because the sun as it rises has strong, bright rays, but when it sets, appears to be weaker”.

Iul. Val.

Then he asked the next which, in his opinion, was stronger: life or death? The answer was “Life, because the power of sun grows in the East, and fades away on the way to the West; the same is among people, those who live are more powerful than those who are dying”.

IV

Plut. *Alex.*

The fourth, when asked why he had induced Sabbas to revolt, replied: “Because I wished him either to live nobly or to die nobly”.

Pap. Berol. 13044

He asked the fourth why they had decided to fight with Sabbas against him; he answered: “for that, he has noble life or noble death”.

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

[When asked] for what reason they had made Sabbas, who was their king, revolt, [they] answered, "Because they wished him to live well rather than die ill".

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked, "For what reason did you advise king Sambus to wage war against me?" The Indian replied, "That he might live honourably or die honourably".

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the fourth why they had persuaded Samos to fight with him; he answered: "for that, he has noble life or noble death".

Hist. Alex. Magni

"Which is greater, the earth or the sea?" "The earth. The sea is itself surrounded by the earth".

Iul. Val.

And he asked "Which is larger, the land or the sea?" "The land, which holds the sea in it".

V

Plut. *Alex.*

The fifth, being asked which, in his opinion, was older, day or night, replied: "Day, by one day"; and he added, upon the king expressing amazement, that hard questions must have hard answers.

Pap. Berol. 13044

The fifth being asked which had become first: the day or the night, replied, "Day, by one night".

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

And the fifth being asked whether he thought that day or night was first, said "Day ['night' in other editions] by one day".

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked, "Which came first: the night or the day?" The Indian replied, "Night was born first by one day". Then when Alexander hesitated over what to ask, the Indian noticed that and said, "Hesitant questions lead to hesitant answers".

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the fifth which was first: the night or the day? "The night", he replied, "by one day".

Hist. Alex. Magni

Which is the most wicked of all creatures? "Man" they replied. "Answer this question to yourself. You are a wild beast, and see how many other wild beasts you have with you, to help you tear away the lives of other beasts".

Iul. Val.

He asked then which beast of all is the most cunning. He answered with a smile that it is the man.

VI

Plut. *Alex.*

Passing on, then, to the sixth, Alexander asked how a man could be most loved; “If”, said the philosopher, “he is most powerful, and yet does not inspire fear”.

Pap. Berol. 13044

He asked the sixth “How shall one be loved most?”. He said, “By being the most powerful and not seeming terrifying to anyone”.

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

And the sixth being posed with the query “How shall one be loved most?” “By being most powerful; in order that he may not be timid”.

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked, “What should a man do to seem pleasing to everyone?” The Indian replied, “If he should be powerful to apply himself to not seeming vicious”.

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the sixth “How shall one be loved most?”. He replied “By being the most powerful and not seeming terrifying to anyone”.

Hist. Alex. Magni

What is king [Arm.]/kingship [Syr.]? “Unjust power used to disadvantage of others; insolence supported by opportunity; a golden burden”.

Iul. Val.

Then he asked what they thought power was; they answered that this was a power over deception, that time was always favourable, and if one would prefer – unjust audacity.

VII

Plut. *Alex.*

Of the three remaining, he who was asked how one might become a god instead of man, replied: “By doing something which a man cannot do”.

Pap. Berol. 13044

He asked the seventh, “What one must do in order to become a God?”. He replied, “It is impossible for a man to do so”.

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

And the seventh being asked, “How any one of men could become God?” said, “If he did what it is impossible for a man to do”.

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked, how a man might be thought a God. The Indian replied, “By doing something no mortal can”.

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the seventh “What one must do in order to become a God?”, he replied, “It is impossible for a man to do so”.

Hist. Alex. Magni

[Arm.] "Which came first, day or night?" "Night. What is born grows first in the darkness at the mother's womb, and at birth it encounters the light of the day".

Iul. Val.

He asked then whether, in their opinion, the day was first or the night? Without any doubt "The night" – they answered, "because all that is conceived to live begins in the darkness and when is born, wanders through the light".

VIII

Plut. *Alex.*

The one who was asked which was the stronger, life or death, answered: "Life, since it supports so many ills".

Pap. Berol. 13044

He asked the eighth "Which is stronger, life or death?". He replied, "Life".

Clem. Al. *Strom.*

And the eighth being asked, "Which is stronger, life or death?" said "Life, which bears such miseries".

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked which was stronger, life or death. The Indian replied, "Life, for life makes something out of nothing whereas death makes what is into nothing".

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the eighth "Which is stronger – life or death?" "Life" – he replied.

Hist. Alex. Magni

He asked the next "Who cannot be lied to, so we tell him only the truth?" "The god, because we cannot lie to someone who sees everything".

Iul. Val.

He continued asking: "To whom a human being cannot lie?" The answer was, "To God, because he sees everything and knows everything".

IX

Plut. *Alex.*

And the last, asked how long it were well for a man to live, answered: "Until he does not regard death as better than life".

Pap. Berol. 13044

He asked the last one "How much time is there to live in a good way?" [corrupted].

Clem. *Strom.*

And the ninth being interrogated, "Up to what point it is good for a man to live?" said, "Till he does not think that to die is better than to live".

Epit. Mett.

Alexander asked, "How long may a man usefully live?" The Indian replied, "Until such time as he reckons himself more useful dead than alive".

Anecd. Graec.

He asked the ninth “How long is the life of a man pleasant for him?” He answered, “As long as he decides to die nobly”.

Hist. Alex. Magni.

[Arm., Syr., Iul. Val.] “Which side is better, the left or the right?” “The right. The sun rises and then makes its way to the left-hand side of sky. And a woman gives suck first with her right breast”.

Iul. Val.

He asked then, which side of the human body they consider to be estimable. The response was “The left, because even the sun wanders from the left to the right. Furthermore, what was mixed from left part of a man and a woman is considered to be the best, and a mother has her nourishment first in the left breast. Also, the Gods prefer to receive the religious gifts from the left arm and the kings prefer to hold the symbols of their dignity in the left hand”.

In most cases, the questions are the same, although sometimes in changed sequence. Only the *Alexander Romance* and Iulius Valerius’ questions differ a little from other versions (questions about graves (I), kingship or power (VI), lies (VIII) and sides (IX)). There is much speculation about the order of the questions, and their interaction. The most popular point of view in this case is that of U. WILCKEN. He suggests that the *Romance* version is created separately from other versions, though it contains elements close to the Berlin papyrus. He also states that Plutarch has rewritten the source, and that the *anecdotum* goes back to the source earlier than the papyrus. Furthermore, the *Metz Epitome* version, where it differs from Plutarch, goes back to the Greek version, which is older than *Alexander’s* version. According to WILCKEN, the story is taken from an unknown earlier version of the *Alexander Romance*; this opinion, however, has been treated sceptically by F. JACOBY and H. VAN THIEL⁹. As it can be observed, the concurrence of the questions is significant; this fact can suggest that there was one tradition, derived from a source written shortly after the encounter.

Alexander’s meeting with the naked philosophers, is without any doubt, a historical fact. He certainly met them during his Indian campaign. He probably also spoke to them, with a help of interpreters¹⁰.

It is difficult to state that this is a philosophical dialogue, or even a diatribe. Alexander is simply interrogating the philosophers by asking them some witty questions. According to the definition, the diatribe (considered to be shaped by the pupil of Crates of Thebes, Bion of Borysthenes¹¹) is a literary genre which originates in the speeches of wandering philosophers teaching in the streets,

⁹ See BOSMAN 2010: 179.

¹⁰ WILCKEN 1967: 181; SEDLAR 1980: 68 f.; PEARSON 1983: 99; KARTTUNEN 1997: 60 f., STONE-MAN 1995: 103 f.; POWERS 1998: 81; NAWOTKA: 2010a: 311, 320; 2010b: 283 f.

¹¹ DESMOND 2008: 34.

praising poverty, good manners and speaking about morality. W. DESMOND writes about the transformation of the diatribe: "In the hands of successors of Bion, the diatribe style seems to have been a way of talking aloud in writing: the speaker 'shadow-boxes' with an imaginary interlocutor, throwing out punchy questions or objections on the interlocutor's behalf, and then moving in to answer them himself"¹² and "Eventually it came to mean a feigned conversation in which the (e.g. Cynic) philosopher does all of the talking, asking and answering questions on behalf of an overawed or imaginary interlocutor. Owing perhaps to Bion's works, it became one of the main literary styles of Cynicism"¹³. According to D.R. DUDLEY, the characteristic of the diatribe are "the use of allegory, anecdote, and quotation, its appeals to an imaginary adversary [...]. Diatribe is a moral exposition of some brief topic"¹⁴.

It can be clearly observed that Alexander's dialogue with naked philosophers cannot be called a diatribe, due to its different character. Neither Alexander nor the gymnosophists are preaching, nor is there a specific theme of their encounter, and this is not a philosophical debate either. This dialogue is called Cynic because of the fact that the most popular testimony of Alexander's meeting with Indian philosophers (Calanus and Dandamis) was transmitted by Onesicritus, and, automatically, the dialogue with Indian sages preserved on the papyrus is also claimed to be a Cynic text, created for the purpose of glorifying the Cynic model of life¹⁵. Furthermore, the Indian philosophers who take part in the conversations are also very similar in appearance to the Cynics. They are naked, they practice the asceticism and they claim to own nothing, except for the part of the ground they are standing on. However, there are also differences between the Indian and the Cynic attitudes towards asceticism. The Cynics wanted to puzzle people and take them by surprise, while their eccentric behaviour was intended to show their negation of social standards. Indian ascetics, on the other hand, performed mortifications in order to gain the liberation from earthly life and unite with a god. As J.W SEDLAR writes: "Onesikritos' own philosophical interests appear in his tendency to regard the Indian ascetics as prime examples of the recommended Cynic mode of life – albeit the Cynics' motivations had nothing at all to do with the pursuit of holiness"¹⁶. Also, the way of conducting the conversation is being associated by many scholars with Greek philosophical dialogues. In my opinion, it is not a usual debate on philosophical matters, but a kind of a riddle contest. Alexander asks the gymnosophists a series of difficult questions

¹² DESMOND 2008: 34.

¹³ DESMOND 2008: 243.

¹⁴ DUDLEY 1937: 111.

¹⁵ WILCKEN 1923: 173–180; BROWN 1949: 47; KARTTUNEN 1989: 91; POWERS 1998: 84.

¹⁶ SEDLAR 1980: 69.

and in the case of them not knowing the answer, the punishment is death. This dialogue can be treated as a classic example of a *neck-riddle*. The king asks ten Brahmins to answer his questions, and the one whose answer will be the worst will die first. Orientalists point out that this sort of conversation is familiar not only to the Greek literature but also very widely to the Oriental.

2. GREEK RIDDLES

There exists a vast tradition of riddles in Greece. There can also be observed a tradition of “cryptic speech” – *ainos* or *ainigma* (riddle). The term *ainigma* occurs for the first time in Pindar F 177d SNELL–MAEHLER¹⁷. In Hesiod’s *Melampodeia*, there can be found an enigmatic question in the brief discussion of Calchas and Mopsus. Calchas is told that when he finds a better seer than he is, he will die¹⁸. The discussion is as follows:

“I am filled with wonder at the quantity of figs this wild fig-tree bears though it is so small. Can you tell their number?”
 And Mopsus answered: “Ten thousands is their number and their measure is a bushel: one fig is left over, which you will not be able to put into the measure”.
 So said he; and they found the reckoning of the measure true. Then did the end of death shroud Calchas¹⁹.

This example proves that the enigmatic and witty questions asked in order to surprise or confuse are not characteristic only for Cynic philosophers.

Another well-known example of a *neck-riddle* is a story of Oedipus and the Sphinx. It is interesting that a similar riddle, as well as the Sphinx-like creature *pu-rushamriga* or *narahimsa* (which means “human-beast” in Sanskrit), were known in India. In the Rigveda we can find a variant of the sphinx riddle (hymn 10.117):

One-foot surpasses Two-foot. And Two-foot leaves Three-foot behind. Four-foot comes at the call of Two-foot, watching over his herds and serving him²⁰.

The sphinx riddle is also known in Bihar:

Miḍō setārē dō upuniākātātē seneā
 Tārā singi do bāriākātātē seneā
 Āubtānrē dō āpeākātātē seneā

A creature in the morning with four legs walks
 At noon with two legs walks
 in the evening with three legs walks.

¹⁷ GARTNER 2001: 756.

¹⁸ HUIZINGA 2007: 174.

¹⁹ EVELYN-WHITE 1914: 266.

²⁰ DONIGER O’FLAHERTY 2000: 69.

Answer – *Ho* (a man)²¹.

Similar kind also:

Hōnrē Lijā
Mārāngrē toto
Barē jatō
Bitar uṇḍū

When young [it is] clothed,
When adult [it is] naked,
On the head [it has] matted hair,
Hollow within.

Answer – *Mat* (Bamboo)²².

The Greek riddles mentioned above are ancient. However, at the time of the creation of the dialogue, the riddles became much more rare. A similar method of posing questions was familiar to the Cynics, Pythagoreans and Megarian philosophers²³. STONEMAN points out that a question similar in character was asked to Anacharsis (according to Diogenes Laertios I 104). The question was “Who are more numerous, the living or the dead?”, and Anacharsis’ reply was: “In which class do you put those who travel on the sea?”²⁴.

3. THE OLDEST RIDDLE IN INDIA

A vivid example of the *neck-riddle* is given in one of the *Upanishads* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 9, 26). When Vidagdha Sakalya cannot answer Yajnavalkya’s question, his head “shatters apart”²⁵. The Sanskrit riddle is one of the oldest riddles known to scholars. To quote D. BHAGAWAT, the author of the monograph on the Indian riddle, “The Indian tradition of riddles is very ancient, as ancient as that of the earliest myths and liturgies and also closely connected with them. The custom of using riddles in the sacrificial rites, in marriage and death-ceremonies belongs no doubt to an age even earlier than the *Vedas*”²⁶.

BHAGAWAT divides Indian riddles into three types: “The study of the riddle from the earliest Vedic times to the present day shows that three classes of riddles, viz. the ritualistic, the literary and the popular or recreative, are fairly interconnected

²¹ SARKAR 1919: 353.

²² SARKAR 1916: 353.

²³ See FESTUGIÈRE 1971: 161–165; STONEMAN 1995: 99–114.

²⁴ STONEMAN 1995: 111.

²⁵ OLIVELLE 1998: 101.

²⁶ BHAGAWAT 1965: 3.

and their tradition though varied is continuous²⁷. The recreative riddle is primarily cosmological, theological or speculative. The non-ritualistic riddle is chiefly literary or at times didactic²⁸. Cosmological riddles appear in Vedas, and they make up an important part of a Sanskrit ritual more than two thousands years old²⁹. That type of riddles occur in the *Rigveda*, *Atharvaveda* and *Yajurveda*, as well as in the epic; in the *Mahābhārata* there are two famous episodes of that kind.

The first text I would like to present is the *Rigveda*. The most important of Indian religious writings, as well as a literary masterpiece, it is usually ascribed by scholars to a time not far from beginning of the first millennium BC. It is a collection of Sanskrit religious hymns, part of which contains riddles, most of them on philosophical and cosmological subjects. One of the greatest examples of Vedic riddles appears in hymn I 164. It begins with such riddles:

Of this benignant Priest, with eld grey-coloured, the brother midmost of the three is lightning.

The third is he whose back with oil is sprinkled. Here I behold the Chief with seven male children³⁰.

And the proposed answer is: The priest is Sun, his next brother is lightning, another form of fire, and the third brother is the sacred fire perpetually maintained by each householder, and fed with oblations of clarified butter. The seven children are probably the priests³¹.

Another riddle:

Seven to the one-wheeled chariot yoke the Courser; bearing seven names the single Courser draws it.

Three-naved the wheel is, sound and undecaying, whereon are resting all these worlds of being³².

M. WINTERNITZ suggests such an answer: “The seven priests of the sacrifice harness (by means of the sacrifice) the sun-chariot, which is drawn by seven horses or one horse with seven forms: this immortal sun-wheel has three naves, namely, the three seasons (summer, rainy season and winter), in which the life of all mankind is passed. However, other solutions of the riddle are possible³³.”

In the *Rigveda* there also appears the following sequence of riddles: “Who moves the air? Who makes a noise on seeing a thief? Who is the enemy of

²⁷ BHAGAWAT 1965: X.

²⁸ BHAGAWAT 1965: 4.

²⁹ TAYLOR 1948: 11.

³⁰ GRIFFITH 1896: I 164.

³¹ BHAGAWAT 1965: XII.

³² BHAGAWAT 1965: 2.

³³ WINTERNITZ 1927: 117.

lotuses? Who is the climax of fury?" The answers to the first three, when combined, give the answer to the fourth. The first answer is "bird" (*vi*), the second "dog" (*cva*), the third "sun" (*mitra*) and the whole is Viśvamitra, Rama's first teacher and counsellor, and a man noted for his temper³⁴.

Also in the *Yajurveda* one can find several theological riddles constituting a part of a riddle game performed by priests during sacrifice, which was part of the cult. An example of this riddle game occurs, *Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā* section XXIII:

The Hotar:

"Who wanders lonely on his way?
Who is constantly born anew?
What is the remedy for cold?
What is the great corn-vessel called?"

The Adhvaryu:

"The sun wanders lonely on its way.
The moon is constantly born anew,
Fire is the remedy for cold,
The earth is the great corn-vessel".

The Adhvaryu:

"What is the sun-like light?
What is the ocean-like flood?
And what is greater than the earth?
What is that of which no measure is known?"

The Hotar:

"Brahman is the sun-like light,
The sky is the ocean-like flood,
And greater than earth is God Indra,
But it is cow, of which no measure is known".

The Udgatar:

"Into what things has the Purusa penetrated?
And what things are contained in the Purusa?
This riddle, Brahman, I give thee to solve
What answer hast thou now to make?"

The Brahman:

"The five, it is, into which the Purusa has penetrated.
And these are they which are contained in the Purusa [human being, also spirit]
That is the answer I have thought out for thee;
In the magic strength of knowledge thou art not above me"³⁵.

³⁴ BLAUNER 1967: 50.

³⁵ WINTERNITZ 1927: 183.

In fact, two questions that appear in this passage are rather similar to those that Alexander asks the gymnosophists: “And what is greater than the earth? What is that of which no measure is known?” In the oldest version of the dialogue (*Pap. Berol.* 13044), the second question is: “After that, he asked which was larger, the land or the sea: ‘The land (he answered), because the sea lies on the land’. It is not exactly the same, but it encapsulates a very similar idea.

The same can also be said about the second of the quoted questions. In the dialogue, there is also a question referring to the idea of something that cannot be counted, so it is immeasurable (“which is more numerous, the living or the dead?”). The answers are:

- The living, for the others are nothing and nothing cannot be counted (*Epit. Mett.*).
- The dead are more numerous, but because they no longer exist they cannot be counted. The visible are more numerous than the invisible (*Hist. Alex. Magni*).
- The dead are more numerous, because they cannot be counted, because they do not exist. It can be said that, for sure, that those who cannot be seen, cannot be considered either (*Iul. Val.*).

This Vedic type of riddle games during the sacrifice was designed to provide a god with some entertainment and make him pleased. This sort of entertainment is called *brahmodya*, which means “rivalry in sacred knowledge, playful discussion of theological questions or problems”³⁶. Another example of such riddle game appears during the horse sacrifice when the contestants ask questions such as: “Who roams alone?” (“The sun”), and “What is the furthest limit of the earth?” (“This *vedī* [sacrificial altar]”). The purpose is to affirm understanding of the hidden connections between the sacrifice and the cosmos. This format of brahmins riddle competition is also used in Upanishadic debates, such as that beginning at *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* III 1,1³⁷. R. STONEMAN even suggests the idea that “it seems likely that Onesicritus, on discovering some important Vedic text of this kind, recognized its susceptibility to the sort of questions he was familiar with from discussions at home, and created a composite”³⁸.

4. RIDDLES IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

The *Mahābhārata*, the great Indian epic whose date most scholars set in the period from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD, has also several stories containing the dialogue similar to that found in Alexander’s dialogue. The most important examples of such debates can be found in the *Vanaparvan*.

³⁶ MONIER-WILLIAMS 2002, THOMPSON 1997.

³⁷ OLIVELLE 1998: 75.

³⁸ STONEMAN 2008: 96.

First, the verbal contest between Bandī and Aṣṭāvakra. “In these discussions the element of competition was so strong, that the winner in order to celebrate his victory fully saw that his opponent lost his life”³⁹. An opposite situation can be observed in the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and Yakṣa (*Yakṣapraśna*). This discussion has very similar questions to those from Alexander's dialogue with the gymnosophists. Yudhiṣṭhira is frequently involved in such dialogues, because he is considered the wisest of all Pāṇḍavaḥ brothers.

The Pāṇḍavaḥ brothers are in the woods, searching for sticks for the sacrifice. They become thirsty and Yudhiṣṭhira orders the youngest Nakūla to find water. Nakūla finds a beautiful lake. He drinks and suddenly hears an invisible spirit (Yakṣa) that speaks out of the air and warns him that before drinking he must answer questions that Yakṣa would ask him. Nakūla ignores that, drinks the water and falls lifeless onto the ground. Yudhiṣṭhira sends another brother, Sahadeva, but he follows the same pattern. When Yudhiṣṭhira is finally left alone, he arrives at the lake and sees all his brothers lying lifeless on the ground. He approaches the lake and hears the same voice of Yakṣa who desires him to answer all the questions. Yakṣa asks Yudhiṣṭhira over a hundred of brief and difficult questions in order to bring his brothers back to life. If he had not answered these questions, his brothers would have remained dead. Here are several of the questions:

Yakṣa then said, “What is it that maketh the Sun rise? Who keeps him company? Who causeth him to set? And in whom is he established?” Yudhiṣṭhira answered, “Brahma maketh the Sun rise: the gods keep him company: Dharma causeth him to set: and he is established in truth”.

The Yakṣa asked, “*What is weightier than the earth itself? What is higher than the heavens? What is fleeter than the wind? And what is more numerous than grass?*” Yudhiṣṭhira answered, “The mother is weightier than the earth; the father is higher than the heaven; the mind is fleeter than the wind; and our thoughts are more numerous than grass”. The Yakṣa asked, “What is that which doth not close its eyes while asleep? What is that which doth not move after birth? What is that which is without heart? And what is that which swells with its own impetus?” Yudhiṣṭhira answered, “A fish doth not close its eyes while asleep: an egg doth not move after birth: a stone is without heart: and a river swelleth with its own impetus”.

The Yakṣa asked, “*Who is the guest of all creatures? What is eternal duty? What, O foremost of kings, is Amrita? And what is the entire Universe?*” Yudhiṣṭhira answered, “Agni is the guest of all creatures; the milk of kine is Amrita, Homa (therewith) is the eternal duty, and the Universe consist of air alone”.

The Yakṣa asked, “What is that which sojourneth alone? What is that which is re-born after its birth? What is the remedy against cold? And what is the largest field?” Yudhiṣṭhira answered, “The sun sojourneth alone; the moon takes birth

³⁹ BHAGAWAT 1965: 10.

anew: fire is the remedy against cold: and the Earth is the largest field”. The Yakṣa asked, “What is the highest refuge of virtue? What of fame? What of heaven? And what, of happiness?” Yudhiṣṭhira answered, “Liberality is the highest refuge of virtue: gift, of fame: truth, of heaven: and good behaviour, of happiness”.

The Yakṣa asked, “*With what is world enveloped?*” – The world is enveloped with darkness. “*What sort of a man is called honest and what dishonest?*” – He is honest who desires the weal of all creatures, and he is dishonest who is unmerciful.

The Yakṣa asked, “*What doth one gain that speaketh agreeable words? What doth he gain that always acteth with judgement? What doth he gain that hath many friends? And what he, that is devoted to virtue?*” Yudhiṣṭhira answered, “He that speaketh agreeable words becometh agreeable to all. He that acteth with judgement obtaineth whatever he seeketh. He that hath many friends liveth happily. And he that is devoted to virtue obtaineth a happy state (in the next world)”⁴⁰.

As it can be observed, these questions are not only similar in character to those of Alexander’s meeting with philosophers but also contain some of the same ideas. The first three italicised questions (“What is weightier than the earth itself?”, “What is more numerous than grass?”, “Who is the guest of all creatures?”) are qualitative ones, the same as those from the Alexander dialogue: Plut. *Alex* 64, *Pap. Berol.* 13044, Clem. Al. *Strom.*, *Epit. Mett.*, *Anecd. Graec.* (I) and *Hist. Alex. Magni*, Iul. Val. (II), and, in the same order, questions II, III, V as well as *Pap. Berol.* 13044, Clem. Al. *Strom.*, *Epit. Mett.*, *Anecd. Graec.* versions in VIII. Further, the question: “With what is world enveloped?” corresponds to the questions concerning the problem which is greater, the land or the sea – in *Pap. Berol.* 13044, *Epit. Mett.*, *Anecd. Graec.* (II) and *Hist. Alex. Magni*, Iul. Val. (III). Finally, the last group of questions, concerning the quality of a man (“What sort of a man is called honest and what dishonest?”, “What doth one gain that speaketh agreeable words? What doth he gain that always acteth with judgement? What doth he gain that hath many friends? And what he, that is devoted to virtue?”) corresponds to the questions from Plut. *Alex.*, *Pap. Berol.* 13044, Clem. Al. *Strom.*, *Epit. Mett.*, *Anecd. Graec.* (VI) and Plut. *Alex.* (VII).

There is another conversation similar to that of Yudhiṣṭhira and Yakṣa in the *Mahābhārata*. One of the brothers, the strongest, Bhīma is roaming in the woods and meets a great king of the snakes, Nahuṣa. The snake hurls itself at him and clings to him so tightly that Bhīma cannot extricate himself. His brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, finds him and discovers that the huge snake is actually the king Nahuṣa, who had turned into this creature as a result of the curse of wise man Agastya. He is not to be released from this curse until he finds somebody who can answer all philosophical questions which he asks. The questions given by the snake are more philosophical and the whole dialogue is more like a debate,

⁴⁰ ROY 1889–1896: III 662–677.

however, once again, there can be found the situation of saving life of someone by giving the correct answer, the same as in the dialogue of Alexander and the naked philosophers.

3. INDIAN DOCTRINE?

G. DUMÉZIL in his brief paper *Alexandre et les sages de l'Inde* pointed out that the answers of Indian sages are closely attached to the Indian doctrine. In his remarks, he notes that the answers of the naked philosophers are actually close to the Indian thought. Firstly, as regards question VIII (“What is stronger: life or death?” – “Life is stronger than death, because it supports so many miseries”) he indicates that the belief that human life is filled with misery and pain is fundamental for almost all of Indian doctrines. One can be released by acting increasingly wise and being more and more religious as well as doing no harm to any living creature. The way the Indian ascetics behave is to liberate themselves from that misery by overcoming the weakness of the human body, along with its needs and desires. When one achieves the state of “liberation”, he is reborn, and that may be the reason why the first of the philosophers answers to the king that the living are more numerous than the dead. The fifth question also appears to have some Indian spirit. The question is: “Which was eldest, night or day?” The philosopher replied, “Day was eldest, by one day at least”. G. DUMÉZIL explains that for Indians the night has a good aspect – it is time to rest. The night is not the same as darkness or nothingness. He concludes that in result the day was first, and cites the part of Rigvedic hymn I 123:

She before all the living world hath wakened, the Lofty One who wins and gathers treasure. Revived and ever young on high she glances. Dawn hath come first unto our morning worship⁴¹.

The Aurora is also called in Sanskrit *apūrvya* – “without the first one before her”.

CONCLUSION

The Indian sages are frequently placed among the Persian magi, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Druids, Celts, Etruscan diviners, hence the placing of the wise men somewhere far, at the edges of the known world is a literary convention. Still, it does not deny the historical authenticity of Alexander's encounter with the naked philosophers of India. In all probability, the meeting took place in Taxila in the spring of 326 BC. The only point of controversy is the content of their conversation. As I tried to argue, this dialogue cannot be called

⁴¹ GRIFFITH 1896: I 123.

Cynic. Onesicritus is frequently claimed to be the dialogue's author, because he is regarded to be the philosopher close to the king. However, was he the only one? Moreover, the riddling-tradition is significantly older than Cynic philosophy, both in Greece and in India.

Although the encounter of Alexander and Indian philosophers is a fact, the contents of their dialogue as we know it appears to be literary fiction. The concurrence of the questions is probably not accidental and, most likely, all surviving versions of the dialogue originate from one source, perhaps the work of a companion of Alexander the Great unknown to us. The form of this dialogue – short and witty questions asked to surprise and, as a result, to defeat the adversary – was very popular in India since ancient times. Also, the meaning of the questions and their character are also similar to the Indian examples. It seems to me that the author of this story had quite advanced knowledge of India and its literature. This is not surprising, considering that Alexander spent almost two years in India and much of that time in Taxila, the ancient centre of learning. This dialogue seems to be inspired by or even stylized to be Indian, in order to give the reader the sense of Indian civilization.

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