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Pl. 11d. Fragment of the inscription SOYCE 1898 + 1897a-b + 1833a-e
(Materials of the Soviet-Yemenite Complex Expedition.
Courtesy of Serge A. Frantsouzzoff's Private Archive.)

Tatiana V. Ermakova

Ceylonese Buddhist Priest Subhuti's Letters to I.P. Minayev:

Preface, publication, commentaries

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Abstract: Letters of the 19th c. famous Ceylonese Buddhist priest Subhuti to the Indologist I.P. Minayev are a valuable historical source. Addressed to the Russian scholar, these relatively brief messages touch on a range of topics essential for understanding both I.P. Minayev's scholarly interests and the state of Buddhist manuscript culture and Buddhism in Ceylon in the 1870s. Subhuti's letters are kept in I.P. Minaev's personal collection at the Archives of the Orientalists at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This is the first time they have been published with commentary.

Key words: I.P. Minayev, Buddhist priest Subhuti, Archives of the Orientalists IOM RAS, Buddhism at Ceylon, manuscript culture of Ceylon.

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This paper aims to explicate one item from the archival heritage of the father of Russian Hindu studies I.P. Minayev (1840–1890). Letters from the Ceylonese Buddhist priest Subhuti reveal concrete circumstances of Minayev's scientific work during his stay at Ceylon.

I.P. Minaev's trip to India in 1874–1875 was initiated by the Russian Geographical Society in the hope that a qualified Indologist would be able to form an informed opinion on the religions of India and the current state of affairs in Hindustan. The scholar also had his own research plans: to collect original manuscripts unknown in Europe for his research, and this could be accomplished by establishing contacts in manuscript storage and copying cen-

ters. It is worth noting that in Buddhist cultural regions, manuscript production was largely supported by pious practices: personally copying a manuscript or paying a copyist of the Word of Buddha was considered a meritorious deed. Undoubtedly, the official status of Buddhism in Ceylon influenced the opportunities for increasing the number of manuscript copies of the Buddhist canon and commentaries. Freedom of preaching was accompanied by the growth of monasteries as centers of education and written culture.

Minayev's stay in Ceylon (1874–1875) coincided with a period of active collecting of canonical and commentarial literature, as well as works on grammar, medicine, and other fields of traditional knowledge. Active interest of enlightened Buddhist monks in preserving the written heritage stemmed from the need to consolidate the Buddhist community — the sangha — in the face of Christian missionary activity, too. An important source for exploring this topic is the section “Colombo and Buddhist Monks” in I.P. Minayev's extensive survey of Ceylon published in 1878.¹

I.P. Minayev noted this circumstance in the section of his essay “In Ceylon” describing the religious situation on the island.

Minayev wrote: “I had special purposes during my stay in Colombo <...>. Soon after arriving in Colombo, I had to find the Government's Oriental Library. About this library people widely discussed with me in London, <...> but in Colombo itself no one suspected its existence”.² As a result, the Russian traveller could see manuscripts.

Minayev's interest in manuscripts naturally led to contacts with Buddhist monks. “They are very much accessible: They do not avoid the European, they do not hide from him, neither their sacred things, nor their books, they are very kind and helpful; willingly and even with pleasure and with some pride show all that is remarkable in their monasteries”.³

These contacts were very beneficial to traveler. For example, he wrote: “...I kept an acquaintance with many monks and loved to visit them. From them I learned many things that could not be learned by other means or from other persons”.⁴

The letters mention manuscripts copied at Minayev's request. Predominant among them are works on Pāli grammar. This peculiarity may be explained by the Russian Orientalist's previous academic career. By the time

¹ MINAYEV 1878.

² MINAYEV 2020: 44–45. First publ. in Russian see: MINAYEV 1878.

³ Op. cit.: 46.

⁴ Op. cit.: 44–45.

of his stay in Ceylon, I.P. Minayev was already an expert in the Pali language. His doctoral dissertation analyzing Pāli morphology and phonetics was based on works of Indian and Ceylonese grammarians.

Minayev's contribution to the study of Pali grammar has been analyzed by V.G. Erman. Minayev used the traditional grammars of Kaccayana and Rupasiddhi, manuscripts of which are mentioned in the letters, in his work. Shortly after its publication it was translated into French. An English translation was made from the French edition and published in Burma in 1875.⁵ Therefore, Minayev knew exactly what he was looking for in libraries of Buddhist temples and among monks.

A valuable source clarifying the results of Minayev's stay in Ceylon is a catalogue of the Pāli part of the scholar's manuscript collection in the Russian National (formerly State Public) Library in St. Petersburg, published by Sri Lankan researcher Ratna Handurukande.⁶ Value information about Minayev's contacts at Ceylon consists in publication by Ceylonese scholar R. Senasinghe.⁷

Several details about the sender — venerable Subhuti (1835–1917) — according to his published biography. The novice Subhūti took a keen interest in the study of the Dhamma as well as Pali. As books were difficult to come by at that time scholars were reluctant to lend the few ola leaf books they had. Subhuti was not the person to get discouraged by such set-backs. He undertook the task of copying hundreds of literary and religious works all by himself and with undaunted courage and perseverance achieved his goal.⁸

As a prior of Abhinavaramaya Temple at Waskaduwa Ven. Śri Subhūti became a Pali scholar of great distinction and compiled the Pali Niganduwa with English and Sinhalese equivalents. It was printed at the Government Printing Press in 1864. The "Nāmamāla", a work of considerable size, was also written by him. It was published in 1876.⁹

Ven. Subhuti carried on a long and persistent effort to get a share of the relics discovered in the stupas of India. He was equally keen to get a cutting of the Bo-tree at Buddha Gaya for his temple.¹⁰ He raised this issue in letters addressed to Minayev, too.

⁵ ERMAN 1967.

⁶ HANDURUKANDE 1990.

⁷ SENASINGHE 2019.

⁸ GURUGE 1984: 20.

⁹ Op. cit: 22.

¹⁰ Op. cit.: 25.

His *Abhidhānappadīpikā*, which was published by the Government Press in 1865 on the orders of Governor Sir Charles Justin McCarthy, had amply compensated for the absence of a Pali dictionary.

Amidst these face-to-face interactions, Ven. Subhūti had to cope with a sizeable international mail. The requests that were directed to him were many: he was asked for information on manuscripts; he had to engage copyists to make paper transcripts of various palm-leaf manuscripts for scholars engaged in editing them for publication in the West; in several cases, his aid was sought in collating manuscripts and for this purpose he had to read and compare Sinhala, Burmese, Thai and Cambodian scripts. Little is known of the system he adopted to keep himself informed of the mass of palm-leaf manuscripts scattered in different temple libraries.¹¹

Subhuti's letters to Minayev are kept in I.P. Minayev's personal collection at the Archives of the Orientalists at the IOM RAS (F. 39, inv. 2, unit 117, ff. 1–9). Most probably they were written down 'by ear' and by different hands. Subhuti signed his letters by personal name in devanagari script (ff. 2, 3 verso) or stamped them (ff. 7, 9). Peculiarities of the letters' texts are preserved since they reflect the English language used at Ceylon in 1870s.

Two letters are dated 1875 and two are dated 1888 and 1889. There is only one envelop. This is the first time they have been published with commentary.

All of the letters were written at Waskaduwa — small town at seashore, where Subhuti's temple was situated. Now it is popular sea resort. Subhuti's temple is included in the list of sights.

1

[F. 1]

Waskaduwa
4th April/75

My dear Sir,

I posted to you three parts of *Rupa Siddhitika*¹² at the immediate arrival of your books and also a letter previously. Two parts of it are herewith sent, and I shall send you the last part of it in the course of eight days. I was much gratified by reading your letter, and especially to hear of the wonderful dis-

¹¹ Op. cit.: 32.

¹² *Rupa Siddhitika* — *Rupasiddhitika* — Pali Grammar.

coveries of General Cunningham¹³ in details, [F. 1 recto] which I hope your goodness would inform him, and also that I have sent him 9 Jatakas.¹⁴

I will be much pleased to comply any of your other necessities. I possess in form of books at your informing me. After you proceeded to Burma and are that I beg you to write me. I shall be thankful if you can transmit me a copy of the new edition of “*Susruta*”.¹⁵ It is with inquiring whether the commentaries for the last portion of that book can be procured from that part of the country. A German Scholar¹⁶ has lakely reached here at the [F. 2] request of the governor for inquiring into the ancient inscriptions found on Stone.

I will be much glad to receive the Jataka at Bharhut in its original Asoka.¹⁷

I remain, Sir,

yours very truly

W. Subhuti

2

[F. 3]

Ceilon

Kalutara

Waskaduwa 30th June 1875

Dear Sir,

I acknowledge the receipt of your letter as well as the books. Is there a commentary to the book called *Wartikapitaya*?¹⁸ Is the other portion of *Kaccathraya*¹⁹ finished? I have forwarded three copies of *Rahulawada Sutta*²⁰

¹³ *Cunningham* — Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893), famous archeologist, discovered numerous ancient inscriptions and monuments, including the Stupa of Bharhut.

¹⁴ *sent him 9 Jatakas* — Subhuti was mentioned by Cunningham in his monograph “The Stupa of Bharhut” as “my good friend Subhuti, the learned Buddhist priest of Ceylon”. See CUNNINGHAM 1879: 58.

¹⁵ *Susruta* — *Suśruta Samhitā* (Suśruta’s Compendium) — medical treatise by Suśruta, ancient Indian physician and surgeon.

¹⁶ *A German Scholar* — Paul Goldschmidt (1850–1877) held the post of Archeological Commissioner of the Government of Ceylon in 1874 and in 1875 started to explore ancient inscriptions in North Central provinces, especially at Anurodhapura. See MULLER 1883: 3.

¹⁷ *original Asoka* — so-called Asokan script, i.e. brāhmī script.

¹⁸ *Wartikapitaya* — *Vartika Pitaka* (A Basket of Commentaries). The titles of this manuscript, *Rupa-Lekawa* and *Kaccayana-traya* were identified and explained by the Indologist E.A. Desnitskaya, and I am thankful to her for collegial help.

¹⁹ *Kaccatharaya* — *Kaccayna-traya*. A treatise on Pali grammar.

²⁰ *Rahulawada Sutta* — *Rahulavada Sutta* — Buddha’s admonition to his son Rahula.

and a Commentary. The other portion will be forwarded soon. The book called *Sesanawansa*²¹ is written in Burmese characters, so I have ordred three Sinhalese copies to be written, but it is very difficult to get it done even for payment; however, I shall forward the same to you with the least possible delay. The parcel and the letter sent to the address of Louis Da Soysa Modliar²² were duly received. Please to send me two of the best quality of the pattern rent, for [F. 3 recto] the purpose of making a present of tham to the person who copied the book *Roopasse Le Kawa*.²³ The other part of the book called “*Karika*” alluded to in the last portion of *Rupasse Le Kawa* will be sent soon. Am I do forward them to the very same place where I have last addressed? I did not get the list of books printed at Benares. I am also anquious to know what the Pali books you published are. I have inserted your name in the book which I am about to publish.

In what month are you going to Birmah?²⁴ Do you intend to go back from Birmah to Russia throwgh Galle, or through some ather route?

With ... respect

I remain,

Sir, Yours obediently

<signature Subhuti in devanagari script >

P.S. I shall also thank you to send me “*Grammatikas*” *Wachaspatya*.²⁵

postscript: I <...> the portions now in print.

²¹ *Sesanawansa* (Sasanavamsa) — this manuscript was written by Pannasami in 1861 in Burmese characters. It concerns the history of Buddhism. Two palm-leaf manuscripts in Sinhalese script are kept in the British Museum collection. Subhuti’s manuscript after Minayev’s death was sent by S. Oldenburg to Mabel Bode who produced a critical edition of the text. See: SASANAVAMSA 1897.

²² *Louis Da Soysa Modliar* — Louis Da Zoysa. *Modliar* — (Mudaliyar) in Ceylon — a position in local administration. L. Da Zoysa was involved in the search and description of Buddhist manuscripts. He played an important role in inspecting collections of manuscripts kept at Buddhist temples.

²³ *Roopasse Le Kawa* (Sinhalese) — Rupa-Lekhawa. Title of the grammatical treatise.

²⁴ Minayev visited Burma only in 1885–1886.

²⁵ *Wachaspatya* — Vachaspatya. A Comprehensive Sanskrit-Sanskrit dictionary. See: *Vachaspatya* 1873.

3

[F. 4]

9th April 1888
Waskaduwa, Kalutara
Ceylon

Dear Sir,

I am delighted to have heard from after a very long time and much more to have read the book that accompanied your letter. I am anxious to know as to how you came to get it as also its authorship. I intend to publish about the same in the leading newspapers of this Island²⁶. I will try my best to procure you a revised copy of the book "Sesanawanse" by comparing all the existing manuscripts, and taking a reliable and authoritative version written either in paper or in olas. I think the work will rather be delayed owing [F. 4 recto] to my ill-health, but notwithstanding that I will endeavour to the best of my ability to hasten it. I am further anxious to know whether you framed the index or whether it was in the original book.

If you require any books from the Island I will be glad to send you on your informing me. Please be good enough to let me know whether you have seen or come to be in possession of any relics of "Buddha" or of the "Arahats" during your tour in India whilst engaged in antiquarian researches.

[F. 6] I am, Sir,
Yours truly
W. Subhuti

[F. 5]

Envelope
Prof. I.P. Minayeff
University of St. Petersburg
Russia
Galernaya 56
Kalutara

²⁶ *Island* — refers to Ceylon.

(ff. 7, 9 are stamped²⁷)

[F. 7]

To prof. Minayeff

11th February 1889

Waskaduwa

Kalutara

Ceylon

Dear Sir,

The book “Sasanawamsa” which you requested of me delayed so long owing to its existence in Burmese characters; for copyists who have a knowledge of Burmese letters are scarce among Singhalese.

After a long inquiry I found a copyist who holds a governmental post, but as it seemed to me, that on account of his governmental business he would perhaps [F. 7 recto] require a period not less than year to produce a complete copy of the work. I was obliged to get another copyist who completed the manuscript copy for me. I ask you not to think that this delay was on the part of my carelessness of your request. Although I required this marvellous delay to draw a single copy of this work. I could get drawn more than eight copies, within a month, if it was in Singhalese characters.

I am sorry to say that I received no answer to the letter I wrote you acknowledging of the [F. 8] book you sent me. The three papers that you sent me, which are monthly publications, proved very excellent, and I wish for more numbers of the same publication.

I wrote an article, expressing gratitude for the book you sent, to one of the vernacular leading newspapers in the Island. Please be good enough to send me another copy of the book. I am always willing to render you my aid in sending you books <...> which are procurable in Ceylon [F. 8 recto] when I am informed with the least delay as possible.

Several Pāli have been published at present in Ceylon, and if you want I can send them.

Have you found out “Buddha’s Relics” in Buddhistical (sic!) monuments in India, during your long journey through the continent. Some years ago I read in an English newspaper, that a European scholar found out some of the

²⁷ “P.N.M.W. Subhuti Thero”. Pavara Neruttikācariya Mahavibhāvi Waskaduwa. It is Subhuti’s full title. At the bottom — “Buddhist Priest”. At the centre — “Abhinava Rama” — Temple’s name.

bone relics of Buddha [F. 9] at Sicriguli in the neighbourhood of the Ganges in India.

I can partly attribute the delay of the manuscript copy to my own refering through the book. My late confinement to bed made a somewhat delay to this manuscript.

I was very ill during several months,
But hope that you are in good health
and sound.

I am yours <...> truly

W. Subhuti.

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