Review Article

Where is the Romarāji?*

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Written by well known authorities, these papers offer fascinating glimpses of inter-relationships between the medical literatures of India, Sri Lanka and Tibet. Three of the contributions are devoted to Indian medical literature. P. V. Sharma, who is currently editing Niścalakāra’s Ratnaprabhā commentary on Čakrapāṇidatta’s Cikitsāsāṅgraha, offers much new information on this commentary (pp. 107-112). In ‘Āstāṅga-sāṅgraha, Kalpasthāna: I. Translation and Notes’ (pp. 113-137), Kenneth G. Zysk provides a preliminary translation with annotations on the basis of all the available editions and parallel versions; the translations of the remaining chapters of the Kalpasthāna of this text are, incidentally, appearing in regular succession on the pages of this journal. G. Jan Meulenbeld argues that blood occupied a more prominent position in the nosological theory prior to the Aṣṭāṅga-sāṅgraha (pp. 91-106). Jinadasa Liyanaratanē surveys ‘Sinhalese Medical Manuscripts in Paris’ (pp. 73-90) as part of a research project on the history of medical literature in Sri Lanka. Of the six manuscripts discussed here, three are related to northern Indian classical Āyurveda and the other three contain both Āyurveda and Siddha elements; the latter probably composed by Tamils settled in Sri Lanka. Indian classical medicine did not know pulse reading (Nādi-parikṣā), but this is said to be one of the pillars of Tibetan medicine. The standard Tibetan treatise entitled Rgyud bṣi or ‘Four Tantras’ deals with this subject in the first chapter of the last book. In ‘Some Remarks on Sphygmology’ (pp. 66-72), R.E. Emmerick discusses

the problems in translating some of these verses.

The first paper, by Rahul Peter Das, entitled ‘The romanāji- in Indian Kavya and Ayurvedic Literature’, is also the longest: it occupies nearly half of this volume (pp. 1-65). If the review concentrates on this paper for a detailed discussion, this is not to minimise the importance of other contributions. Das’s paper spans two disciplines and raises an important issue about the conventions in Sanskrit poetry which deserved to be widely noticed.

One of the several signs of puberty in both boys and girls is that a thin line of hair grows from the pubic region towards the navel. In the case of men it even extends upwards beyond the navel and appears prominently in hirsute men. But not so in women. There it stops at the navel, and even if it extends above this, it is so faint that it is rarely visible. Nor is the line ever invested with any special significance in practical life. But in Sanskrit poetry, attention is paid to this line of hair on the female body, which is called romanāji. On examining a number of Sanskrit Kavyas, Das found that a majority of them place this line of hair above the navel. In this highly thought-provoking paper, Das first draws our attention to the dichotomy between the reality (below the navel) and the poetic convention (above the navel), and then tries to understand why Sanskrit poetry locates it at the wrong place.

For this purpose, Das has collected from various anthologies some sixty-two passages that describe the romanāji (pp.10ff.) and analysed some of these in great detail. In order to find a rationale for the anomaly in the poetic convention, Das drew into consideration a formidable array of texts on Ayurveda, Sāmudrikasāstra, Silpaśāstra, lexicography, Buddhist and Jain hagiographies and so on. This material shows that the romanāji we are here concerned with first appears in the descriptions of the Mahāpurusa, i.e. ideal male, in Jain texts. In these descriptions the romanāji is said to have a certain ideal form and is placed below the navel. Later on the romanāji is gradually transferred to the description of females.

The medical texts also speak of the romanāji primarily in connection with the male body as the line of hair below the navel (p.34), but ‘whether they presuppose such a growth on the female body too ... is a matter of speculation’ (p.40). These texts, however, mention the romanāji on the female body as one of the several signs of pregnancy. But here too problems occur. Some texts, like Astāṅga-hṛdaya, Śātrasthāna

1.51, enumerate romanājyāḥ prakāśanam1 ‘the romanāji becoming very distinct’ as one of the signs of pregnancy. As against this, some texts speak of romanājyudgama ‘[sudden] growth of the romanāji’. Das rightly observes that if this is something newly produced by pregnancy, it cannot be the line of hair we have been talking of so far. What is meant is possibly the linea nigra, a dark pigmentation said to occur in the case of pregnancy (§§ 71f.).

But none of these texts offers any justification for the romanāji running from the navel up to the breasts and the author is forced to conclude that this is ‘a particularly glaring example of how a poetic tradition divorced from reality may not only develop, but also be transmitted blindly over the centuries’ (p.52).

Das must be congratulated for this pioneering study. But I feel that there is still more to be extracted from the Kavya passages cited by him. This will not ultimately alter his deductions on the romanāji in different literary genres in general, but it will help us gain a better focus on the poetic conventions. The problem I would particularly like to tackle here is that of descriptions of the romanāji situated below the navel in Kavya literature. According to Das, only Kālidāsa describes such a romanāji. In my opinion, however, at least two other of the poets cited by Das, as well as another poet he has not cited, do so too.

At the outset, Das states (p.9) that he has collected most of the Kavya passages from anthologies. I am quite aware of the difficulty of searching through the haystack of Sanskrit poetry for the needle of the romanāji. However, anthologies arrange the verses topic-wise but torn from the context. And this had the unfortunate effect of making Das in most, though not all, cases neglect the common convention in Sanskrit poetry of describing the female body in a linear sequence from the feet up to the hair (padālikēṣāntavanama) or in the reverse order (keṣādi-padānta).2 In his study of Jain texts, however, Das has taken the

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1 On Rāghuvansā 3.2, Malleśaśātra cites a similar stanza from Vāhaṭa: saivaśūtādīgarbhahalakṣane vāhaṭaḥ. kyāmuṭa garimā kukeṣ mūracchā chārdir avocakam jīrynāḥ prakāśaḥ suvanam romanājyāḥ prakāśanat.

2 In his Aśokakāśikha (ed. Anantavatana Śastri Vetāl, Benaras 1927), Keśava Miśra on p.60 quotes an anonymous authority to the effect that humans should be described from the head downwards and gods from the feet upwards (mīnavā maitīto vanyā devās caramātah punah), but this rule is observed only in its breach. Thus in the
sequence of description into account (pp.46f.)

While celebrating the female body, poets take a slow excursion, as it were, over its whole length, stopping at each station to admire the sights. Whether ascending or descending, the poets rarely deviate from the sequence. In such linear descriptions, the _romarājī_ is one of the stations which the poet utilises for the employment of his wit and poetic flourish. We do not know precisely when this convention started, but soon it seems to have become almost the only mode of describing a woman. Handbooks on poetry supplied the stock phrases to be used and lesser poets completed the obligatory _strīvarīṣana_ in a mechanical fashion. The convention reached its culmination in the Hindi poetry of the Ritti-school (between approximately A.D. 1643 and 1857), where a new genre developed under the designation _Nakh-sikh_. A parallel style in Urdu is called _Sar-ā-pā_. These poems just consist of some witty or clever sayings on each of the successive stations without any connecting link.

It should also be stressed that the poets usually describe the _romarājī_ only as one of the several steps in the linear description, but never the _romarājī_ alone. Therefore, if one is looking in a Kāvyas for a statement about the absolute or relative location of the _romarājī_, one must read the entire linear description, and not just the verses on the _romarājī_; verses culled from anthologies, bereft of the context, may not

_Saundarya-lahāri_, attributed to the great Sāṅkara, the goddess is described from the head downwards (vv.1.47), whereas Bilhana employs the reverse order for the heroine in his _Vikramāṅkadevacarita_ (8.01f.).

3 At the VIIth World Sanskrit Conference held in Vienna in 1991, this reviewer had occasion to hear a highly interesting paper by Alois Wurm on the physical description of a beautiful woman: 'Sundarina-kahāśikahāvarīṣana — A Sanskrit Literary Motif. Preliminary to a Typological Demarcation in a Universal Perspective'

4 cf. Iqībāl Ah'mad (ed), _Mīrzā abdurrāḥmān 'premī' krt nakh-sikh_, Bombay 1972. In the introduction, pp.4f., the editor mentions that Balabhādra (V.S. 1630), his brother Kēśava (V.S. 1657), and a host of others composed texts all called _Nakh-Sikh_. Kēśava provides for 39 "stops" while Lakhminārāyana "Sațīq" Awarāngācāli in his _Taṣvīr-e-gānān_ (composed in 1774) employs a _Sar-ā-pā_ with as many as 169 headings.

5 Except for one Parvatīya Viśvēṣvara who wrote a hundred verses exclusively on this line under the title _Romāvaśītadaka_, but he is an eighteenth century writer obviously working under the influence of the Ritti-school. Das (p.9) announces a forthcoming German translation of this work.

always answer "geographical" queries.

Thus, in order fully to understand the poetic conventions regarding the _romarājī_, one must: (i) study it as part of a linear description of the entire body, and not as an isolated description, (ii) pay attention to the sequential context, and (iii) read the Kāvyas chronologically.

Of the sixty-two Kāvyas passages studied, Das found only one that favours the _romarājī_ below the navel. This is also the oldest available text. The verse in question is Kālidāsa's _Kumārasambhava_ 1.31 (Das, § 25, pp.12f.). Because of the overwhelming number of passages holding the contrary view, Das, though he finally does take this verse to refer to the _romarājī_ below the navel (pp.22f.;40), is very cautious in accepting what I consider to be an unambiguous statement about the location of the _romarājī_. I construe the verse as follows: _tasyāh tanvī navaromarājīh nīvīṃ atikramya natarābihirandhram pravīṇā 'Her thin and new[ly sprouted] romarājī, having crossed the knot of the nether garment, entered the opening of the deep navel.' What Kālidāsa means is this. The lower part of the _romarājī_ is not visible because it is covered by the garment. It becomes visible only after it crosses the _nīvī_. The poet then continues to say that the _romarājī_ 'shone like the lustre of the dark gem in the middle of the hip girdle.' Where is this girdle? As is evident from Indian sculpture, women tied the nether garment well below the navel, and to keep it in position wore a girdle just on the upper fringe of the garment. Thus the _mekhālā_ is always below the navel. Consequently the _romarājī_, when it is said to emerge from below the garment and the girdle and enter the navel, lies unquestionably below the navel.

The context also shows that Kālidāsa is describing each station in a regular sequence in the following ascending order (1.33-48): toe-nails, feet, gait, ankles; calves; thighs; girdle; _romarājī_ reaching up to the navel; waist, three folds; breasts; arms; throat; face; lips; voice; eyes; eye-brows; hair. Das too has drawn attention to these facts, but in a manner far more cautious than necessary.

Similarly, the anonymous verse 15 (Das, § 28, pp.15f.) locates the _romarājī_ below the navel in a successive enumeration of thighs, hips, _romarājī_, navel, waist, breasts, and face. Here too Das is extremely cautious (also on p.22), but I think there can be no doubt in this regard. It is a pity we do not know the source of this verse, because, as we shall see later (see n.16), its chronology is of crucial importance in the discussion.

Subandhu is perhaps the next poet to mention the _romarājī_ in the
course of a linear description in his Vāsavadatta. In the text as it is current today, there are three passages where the *romarājī* is described and these create complications. The first passage reads *romarājīlātālāvālalayenā ... mekhālādāmnā ... parikalitajaghahasthalā* (pp.40f.). Here Vāsavadatta’s hip-region (jaghahasthala) is said to be encircled by a girdle (mekhalādāmnā). The poet uses a number of images to describe the girdle, one of which is *romarājīlātālāvālalayenā*. That is to say, if the *romarājī* is imagined to be a creeper (lāta), the girdle then becomes its *ālāvālalaya*, the circular trench or basin which is dug around the root of a plant and which is filled with water. Thus the *romarājī* is identified/compared with the lāta and the mekhalādāmnā with the *ālāvālalaya*. To use the terminology of Alankāraśāstra, the *romarājī* and the mekhalādāmnā are upamāyas (subjects of comparison) and the lāta and the *ālāvālalaya* are upamānas (objects of comparison). Therefore, what the poet intends to say is just as a creeper rises from the round trench and goes upwards, so does the *romarājī* rise from the girdle and go upwards [towards the navel]. Das avers (n.75 on p.55) that ‘The *ālāvāla*- “basin of water round the root of a plant” of the *romarājī*- mentioned here is in all probability the navel’ (cf. n.8). Syntax does not support this probability for *romarājīlātālāvālalayenā* and the seven other expressions, all in the instrumental, are connected with the immediately following mekhalādāmnā, also in the instrumental.

In Subandhu’s second passage (*romarālalātālāvālalayenā ... prayodhārāhyām*, p.43) the *romarājī* is a creeper and the breasts are reached. This would mean that the *romarājī* is above the navel and reaches up to the breasts.

In the third passage (*hāralatāromarājīvyājagāngayamunāsangama-

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6 Ed. with the Prabodhini Sanskrit and Hindi commentaries by Śāṅkara-deva Śāstri, Varanasi 1954. The text is heavily inflated and needs a proper critical edition.

7 mekhālādāmnā (PW, s.v. dāmn), kāncīgaṇa, etc. are common expressions for a string-girdle, or girdle made of a single strand in contradistinction to broader girdles or those made of multiple strands. For the former, cf. Rāmāyaṇa (critical edition) 2.72.6: līpī ca āndarādānena rājavarṇādi bibh парт mekhālādāmnāḥ cirai rajubaddheva vānari.

For the latter, cf. Kāmāsārambhavā 1.37 etc.

8 Combining the imagery in these two passages, the author of the *Lalītāśavarānāmastaṭra* (ed. Vasant Amān Gladig, Punyapattana 1977, p.7) wrote at a later period: nāthbhāyaṁ kāmgajālātālāvālalayenā. Here navel and *ālāvāla* are equated.

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9 Ed. with the commentary of Bhānucandra and Siddhacandra and Harīcandra Vidyāśākara’s Hindi translation by Mohanadeva Panta, reprint Dillī 1976.
then the three folds, breasts and so on. This sequence shows that Bilhana locates the romarājī below the navel. It is not necessary that each stanza on the romarājī should invariably supply the anatomical-geographical coordinates, but many of these, in fact, do.

Das does not consider the description of the romarājī in the context of the whole passage (8.6-86), nor does he read the verses on the romarājī (8.24-28, 31) in their proper sequence (cf. p.209 above). Consequently he finds most of these verses problematic. Nevertheless, he concludes ‘that the problematic verses ... too fit into the patterns of other verses of Bilhana discussed and thus into that of the majority of other verses’ (§38, p.21), i.e. that Bilhana’s verses locate the romarājī above the navel like the majority of the verses considered in Das’s study. This conclusion goes against the sequence of description which I mentioned just above. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss these verses successively in somewhat greater detail and see what the poet states or implies about the position of the romarājī.

Verse 24 (Das, §33, p.20): The romarājī enters the navel, as if it were a streak of darkness running away from the lustre of the gems on the girdle and trying to hide in the deep cavern of the navel. This is a clear statement that the romarājī runs from the girdle to the navel. Das wonders from which side the line enters the navel.10 But if the romarājī runs away from the lustre, then it must be from below because the girdle is worn below the navel. There cannot be a more explicit statement in poetry. Moreover, note also the echo of Kumārasambhava 1.38 here:

Kū 1.38: tasyāh praviśāt natanābhīrindhram ... tani navaromarājīh. 
VC 8.24: nābhīrindhram praviśātāsaḥ śyāmala romavallā.

Verse 25 (Das, §32, pp.19ff.): For a correct appreciation of this verse, it is necessary to know that it echoes Kumārasambhava 1.24.11

Kū 1.24: vidārahāmīr navameghāsaabdād udbhinnayā raṇasaalakāyeva. 
VC 8.25: bāṭtī romāvali tasyāh payodharabharonnatau

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10 P.20: ‘One could say ... that the romarājī- flees, so to say, away from the vicinity of the jewel. However, it may also be that it is on the other side of the navel, in which case it would, so to say, hide in this after descending from above and refrain from advancing further on its course.’


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S.R. Sarma, Where is the Romarājī? 215

jātā raṇasaalākeva śronvāvaidūryabhūmitah.

Kālidāsa gives expression here to an old belief: when new water-bearing clouds come thundering, columns of beryl stone sprout from the earth. Bilhana plays on the theme through the double meaning of the word payodhara. Therefore, I shall modify Das’s translation as follows: ‘Her romāvali shines like a jewel-rod, produced from the vaidūrya-ground of the hips, with the increase of the heavy clouds/breasts.’ Here also the implication is that the romarājī rises upwards from the pelvic region (śronī).12

Verse 26 (Das, §31, pp.17f.): In this verse the poet sees a parallel between the navel and the romarājī on the one hand, and the golden bracelet (usual meaning of kataka) and the lac oozing from it on the other hand. I cannot visualise why the lac should be oozing from a golden bracelet, but if it does, then it goes downwards, and this is implied by the word dhāra.13

Verse 27 (Das, §37, p.21): Another parallelism between the ensemble of the navel and the romarājī on the one hand, and a ring and a chain on the other, the latter to tie the elephant which is/belongs to Kāma (smaradantinah). A chain normally hangs downwards.14

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12 Assuming that the jewel-rod is meant for the in my opinion impossible purpose of elevating/buttressing/raising the breasts (unnaṭau does not generate such a meaning), Das concludes ‘that at its upper end the romarājī- extends up to the breasts’. But here Bilhana is just playing upon a variation of Kālidāsa’s original theme. There are two parallel images. The first is of the linear romarājī that sprang up from the pelvic region as soon as the breasts rose/grew, both breasts and the romarājī being signs of puberty. The second image is that of longish crystals of beryl sprouting from the earth as soon as clouds rise in the sky. Neither do the beryl crystals reach up to the clouds nor the romarājī up to the breasts.

13 Das wishes to locate the kataka also on the woman’s body and therefore tries various permutations with the different meanings of kataka. But the poet says clearly that the kataka belongs to Kandarpa or Kāma, and this in my opinion precludes its being on the woman’s body too. As an ornament, the word can mean (usually) a bracelet or (very rarely) a girdle. In either case, the lac flowing from it will flow downwards. And with this is compared the romarājī attached to the navel.

14 Again Das indulges in what to me is over-interpretation. Though there is no mention of breasts in the verse, he refers vaguely to other verses with clearer statements and insists that the elephant implies breasts ('actually, the breasts are elephant's frontal lobes'), and that therefore the romarājī connects the navel and breasts. In this verse, as in others, two parallel images are presented. One is the subject of comparison (upā-
Verse 28 (Das, § 34, p.20): The romarajj enters the navel to see how deep it is. There is no explicit statement about the location of the romarajj, but Das thinks that since however a sounding line would fall downwards, the implication ...seems to be that the romarajj is above the navel. Perhaps. But note his comment on the following verse.15

Verse 29 (Das, § 37, p.21): As I have said earlier, the romarajj is described in vv.24-28. After this, the navel is described in vv.29-31. Verse 29 states that the navel looks like a pit produced in the ground by the tip of the bow, when Kāma used it as a climbing pole to reach up to the breasts. In this bow, Das wishes to see the romarajj stretching from the navel to the breasts. I do not, because (i) the verse makes sense without this identification, (ii) this identification goes against the statement of all the other verses, and (iii) when Kāma has climbed up, he must have taken away the bow, so that all one can see is just the pit.

Verse 31 (Das, § 35, p.20): As in 26 and 27, here is a parallelism between the navel-romarajj combination and the ink-pot (actually a clump of dried ink) and the stream of ink, which naturally flows downwards. Das acknowledges this, but also adds (p.21): 'However it may well be that the simile here is not meant so literally, in which case what would matter is merely that the flow is away from the navel, i.e. the romarajj could be taken to be above this.' Sure, but does that supersede the possibility that the romarajj is below, which is the normal

meya and also the topic under discussion (grastuta), and the other is the object of comparison (upanâhâ) and extraneous to the discussion (apratâhâ). The various elements of these two images should be independent of one another in order to produce a clear parallelism, whether this is presented in the form of upanâ, rîpaka or any other figure of speech based on comparison. Therefore, in the present verse, the elephant which belongs to or is identical with Kāma need not, and must not, be sought in the limbs of the woman who is being described. Pertinent is just the fact that the navel and the romarajj together resemble a ring and a chain. Since a chain normally hangs downwards from the ring, the implication is that the romarajj is below the navel. Das thinks of some other possibilities too, but in that case even more possibilities present themselves. Thus, if you hold the other end of the chain and drop it from a very great height, you will see for some minutes the heavier ring below the chain. Again, if you clap the ring around the elephant's foot and fasten the other end of the chain to a post, both the ring and the chain will lie in a horizontal plane. But poetry should not be subjected to this kind of analysis.

15 'It may however be that the picture is not to be taken so literally, i.e. that what is significant here is the mere fact that the 'line enters the opening.'

direction of flow?

Thus in each of these verses (with the possible exception of 28) Bihana makes a clear enough statement that the romarajj lies below the navel.

But there is no denying the fact that there exists a large body of examples where the romarajj is clearly above the navel and is reaching up to the breasts. This shows that at some point of time there occurred a shift in the position of the romarajj, not in the female anatomy, but in poetic imagination. Once the romarajj had gone above the navel, it was firmly made to remain there by the subsequent poets. Perhaps a chronological study of Sanskrit literary works might reveal when this shift took place.16

At least one Sanskrit writer appears to be aware that the romarajj is wrongly located. In the sixteenth century, Kesava Mishra states that the romarajj and the trivali in women are artificial poetic conventions (kavisampradaya or kavisamaya) of the kind where things that do not exist are mentioned. This does not, of course, mean that these two do not exist at all: only that they do not exist in the manner described in conventional poetry.17 At the same time, adds Kesava, it is highly desirable to follow these conventions (kavisampradayasya sarvâpeksha-sâhyâritatvam). Therefore, he teaches how to describe the female body in a descending linear sequence, where he places the romarajj between the breasts and the navel.18

However, the romarajj above the navel cannot be put in the same

16 As we have seen, Kâlidâsa, the anonymous author of verse 15, Subandhu (if the second and third passages are interpolations), and Bîna depict the romarajj below the navel. On the other hand, Mâgha (Śitâpâlavadha 9.22) and Śrîhara (Naïsâthiyâcavita 7.83-87) see it above the navel. Thus two seventh century writers Bîna and Mâgha have contradictory views on the location of the romarajj. Does this warrant the conclusion that the shift began to occur in the seventh century and that poets like Bihana (in the eleventh) still adhered to the older tradition?

17 Ašvâkârâśekkha, p.59: vastusyā yon na bhavati tata api kavisvibhi nibhadhyate. yathā . . .

kastorâcakotyoh satâtriqvâsâhitâ pâdâgâhitadâ māsântare 'pi puspâmīrni trivalo pûra sâriyâm.

18 Kesava enumerates the stock phrases to describe the romarajj thus (ibid., p.48): rekhsârâlaksâvâmâr mûlalâs tena lâdhrâi saivâadsâmbhagâdâmâr upamîyate.
class of poetic conventions as lotuses in flowing waters and the like. Lotus flowers in flowing waters, even if they cannot grow there in reality, would add to the beauty of the waters. The notion of Aśoka trees blooming when kicked by pretty women, though quite impossible, has some charm of its own. But a dark line of hair reaching up to the breasts or even passing through the cleavage, should it occur in reality, would indeed be revolting to Indian sensibilities. That such a poetic convention persisted all the same, that too without any religious or ideological compulsions, is an enigma.

Prof. Rahul Peter Das deserves all credit for drawing our attention to this enigma. This long critique is, in fact, meant to be a tribute to his stimulating article. One looks forward with eager anticipation to his German translation on this “hair-raising” theme.¹⁹

Editors’ Note


On p.292 of the article mentioned please insert the following:

BRONKHORST JANNESBronkhorst: 'Studies on Bhartṛhari, 5: Bhartṛhari and Vaiśeṣika.' Asiatische Studien / Etudes Asiatiques 47.1993, pp.75-94.

¹⁹ Cf. n.5 above.