C.A. Holmboe (1796-1882): The First Norwegian Scholar of Buddhism

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Christopher Andreas Holmboe was professor at the University of Oslo (until 1939 called the Royal Fredrik University), the founder of numismatics in Norway, a gifted and prolific philologist, especially in what at the time was called 'Oriental languages', and a scholar having broad interests and active participation in the contemporary academic world of Europe. Among his many interests was the comparative study of Buddhism, arising from his belief that Buddhism was the source of certain key elements in ancient Nordic religion and culture. He was, in fact, someone who was not afraid of exploring completely new terrain, in this respect not unlike Dan Martin, in whose honour this article is affectionately and respectfully dedicated.

Before exploring Holmboe's studies regarding Buddhism, it may be well to provide some details concerning his life and career. His background was, as was the case with many Norwegian academics at the time, that of a clerical family. His father, Jens Holmboe (1746-1823), was a parish priest in the Norwegian Lutheran church (until the 1840's the only religious organisation officially permitted in Norway), in the same way as a considerable number of his paternal ancestors. His mother came from a distinguished family of civil servants, and his brother, Bernt Michael Holmboe (1795-1850), became professor of mathematics in 1834 at the Royal Fredrik University.

In 1818, C.A. Holmboe graduated in theology from the same university with the highest honours and received a scholarship from the government to study Persian and Arabic at the University of Paris from 1821 to 1822. In that year he was appointed Lecturer in Oriental languages in Christiania, as Oslo was then called, and in 1825 he became professor. He taught Sanskrit – certainly the first to do so in Norway – and contributed to the new translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Danish (which in his lifetime was still the literary and official language of Norway).

Holmboe was one of the founders of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in 1857, but above all he was an eminent

Kværne, Per, "C.A. Holmboe (1796-1882): The First Norwegian Scholar of Buddhism", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 64, Juillet 2022, pp. 344-351.

numismatist and was the director of the Numismatic Cabinet (founded in 1817) of the University for forty-six years – from 1830 until his retirement as professor in 1876. During his long tenure, a number of important caches were discovered, catalogued, and published, largely through Holmboe's efforts. The Cabinet became an important institution at the University, and, in a broader perspective, one of many building-stones in the process of nation-building which characterised cultural and political life in Norway in the nineteenth century. He kept in touch with colleagues abroad, and was a member of several learned societies, including The Asiatic Society in Calcutta. Holmboe's scholarly works were published in Latin (especially his numismatic works), German, French, and Danish (Norwegian).[1]

His inclination was towards a comparative approach, encouraged by the prevalent focus on ancient Indo-European languages, and he published several works in which he compared Old Norse with Sanskrit. The first of these appeared in 1846; it was written in Danish (Norwegian) and entitled *Sanskrit og Oldnorsk. En sprogsammenlignende Afhandling* [Sanskrit and Old Norse. A Dissertation in Comparative Linguistics]. The work that will principally occupy us here, however, is a slim but fascinating volume entitled *Traces de buddhisme en Norvège avant l'introduction du christianisme*, published in Paris in 1857 by Imprimerie de Simon Raçon (71 pp.).[2] Holmboe was, at least to some extent, abreast of current studies of Indian religions. Although he admits in his 'Avant-propos' that he has hardly had time to do more than briefly dip into Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction au Bouddhisme indien* (1844) and translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Lotus de la bonne loi* (1852), he makes greater use of Horace Hayman Wilson's translation of the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (1840) and quotes it on several occasions (pp. 1-2). One has the impression that he did not regard the difference between Buddhism and Hinduism as a fundamental one.[3]

Although not an archaeologist, Holmboe had a keen interest in archaeological excavations, perhaps because of his work as a numismatist. He therefore introduces his work with a fairly long section (pp. 3-19) on a comparison between the Norse funerary mounds (which he refers to by the Old Norse word *haug*) and the Indian *stūpa*.

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1 This biographical sketch is largely based on the article "C.A. Holmboe", *Norsk biografisk leksikon, https://nbl.snl.no/C_A_Holmboe.* Accessed 04.08.2021.

2 Simon Raçon (1810-1903) commenced his career as a printer and publisher in Paris in 1852 and was active until c. 1870. https://www.idref.fr/149405103. Accessed 04.08.2021.

3 In fact, on p. 34, Holmboe includes 'les buddhistes' as a sub-category of 'les Hindous', the latter used as a generic term for the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent (with the exception, it may be assumed, of Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and Jews).

He quotes from the description of a miraculously appearing *stūpa* found in the *Lotus Sūtra*, contrasting it with Cunningham's description of surviving *stūpa*s on the Indian sub-continent,[4] and also refers to Francis Hamilton Buchanan's *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* (1819).[5]

Turning to the Old Nordic sources, he quotes the statement by the Icelandic poet and historian Snorri Sturlason (1179-1241) in the latter's *Ynglinga Saga* [*The Saga of the House of the Ynglings*] to the effect that, 'in memory of great men a tumulus (*haug*) should be erected'.[6] He also quotes *Halfdan the Black's Saga*, likewise by Sturlason, that following the death of King Halfdan the Black (ninth century C.E.), four kings in eastern Norway each wanted to bury him in a *haug* in their own territory, believing this would confer a blessing on the land; to avoid a war, his body was therefore divided into four parts, and each king erected a funerary tumulus in his own territory. This, Holmboe points out (p. 7), corresponds to the account in the *Lalitavistara* of the dividing of the Buddha's body into eight parts, each of which was buried in a *stūpa* in eight different cities respectively. The account in the *Lalitavistara* was available to Holmboe in several Western sources to which he refers, including *Indische Alterthumskunde*[7] by his compatriot Christian Lassen, who from 1830 had been professor of Old Indian language and literature at the University of Bonn.

Holmboe argues that the Old Nordic *haug*s and the Indic *stūpa*s had, at the outset, been built according to the same plan, but that the Indic *stūpa*s had gradually evolved into more complex structures (p. 10). He does, however, point out the equally impressive dimensions of the two types of tumuli (pp. 13-16), and that both often contain a small quadrangular chamber (p. 17). Turning to the contents of the two kinds of tumuli, Holmboe is not able to point to any really significant common traits, resigning himself to record what was known at the time, namely the finds of small items of jewellery and other minor object made from gold and silver, as well as swords in

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4 Holmboe does not give a precise reference, but his source is almost certainly Alexander Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes, or, Buddhist Monuments of Central India*, London, 1854.

5 Francis Hamilton Buchanan, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal*, London, 1819. Holmboe gives the title of Buchanan's book as *Descriptive Account of Nepaul*, perhaps due to (a forgivable) confusion with the volume entitled *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul* by William Fitzpatrick, London, 1811, from which Buchanan drew.

6 The *Ynglinga Saga* is contained in Sturlason's *Heimskringla*, The Chronicle of the Kings of Norway.

7 *Indische Alterthumskunde* was published in four volumes, Bonn, 1844-1861. Holmboe's reference is to vol. 1, pp. 77-78.

the *haug*s (explained, according to Holmboe, by the warlike character of the Old Nordic society), and lamps in the *stūpa*s (pp. 26-29).[8]

It is not surprising that the numismatist Holmboe devotes an entire chapter to coins found in the tumuli. In particular, he describes a number of coins, found in tumuli in Norway, as faithful copies of coins of Indo-Bactrian origin (pp. 30-31), and illustrates this by juxtaposing an Indo-Bactrian original (which he ascribes to the first century C.E.) with a coin, found in Norway, that had evidently been attached to a necklace.[9] He also compares an Indo-Bactrian coin of a slightly later date, depicting the Indian god Śiva standing in front of his mount, the bull, with a bracteate, found on the west coast of Norway, likewise showing a deity and a bull (p. 32). Both the Indo-Bactrian coin and the Nordic bracteate also show a symbol of the kind generally referred to by its Sanskrit term, *svāstika*.[10]

Leaving the tumuli behind, Holmboe proceeds in the following chapter to discuss the symbolic meaning of the *svāstika,* which he rightly points out is of great importance in Buddhism, being found on images of the footprint of the Buddha. His exposition is mainly based on Burnouf's *Lotus de la bonne loi.* As Holmboe had already pointed out, the *svāstika* is found on bracteates from Norway, and he speculates that the two instances of this symbol may have a common origin (p. 37). In a subsequent chapter, he discusses the existence of stones, assumed to be sacred, found in Scandinavia and, in his opinion, similar in shape and size to examples of the Indian *liṅga*. He mentions Buddhism only in passing, but it may be assumed that he felt that this similarity strengthened his case for a general Indian, hence also Buddhist, influence in Norway. In chap. 13 (pp. 44-50), he turns to sacred trees, particularly, as would be expected, to the sacred Bodhi Tree of the Buddhists, providing a number of references to the cuttings of the original Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya brought to Sri Lanka and found growing as venerated replicas of the original outside temples throughout the island. Holmboe thereupon turns to Norway, where certain trees, especially birches growing on the top of ancient tumuli, were venerated by offerings of beer at Christmastime (p. 47) long after the introduction of Christianity. Several examples of depressions or platforms on the summit of tumuli are adduced as

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8 It should be pointed out that systematic excavations of funerary tumuli, resulting in very rich finds not only of 'Viking ships', but also of a wide range of well-preserved artefacts, only began in Norway towards the end of the nineteenth century, so this material was unknown to Holmboe.

9 That the Old Nordic coins are copies, is revealed by the inscriptions, which are in Greek in the Indo-Bactrian coins, reproduced as meaningless signs in the Nordic ones, see Plate 1, ills. 2 and 3.

10 Plate 1, ills. 4 and 5.

proof of the former presence of sacred trees.

While Buddhist *vihāra*s, or monasteries, are attested in abundance in Sri Lanka and many parts of India, it must be admitted that Holmboe's effort to connect them with possible remains of temples or dwellings for priests in the Nordic countries is tenuous. The same goes for his attempt to compare the cave dedicated to St. Sunniva on the island of Selja, off the west coast of Norway, with the famous rock temples of Dambulla on Sri Lanka, which is rather inconclusive, as is the case of certain paved enclosures and cemeteries found in Norway and India respectively. Of greater originality is the comparison between the so-called *mani* walls, known to Holmboe from descriptions by travellers to Ladakh (which he inaccurately refers to as a 'province of Tibet'),[11] and similar structures in Norway (pp. 60-62), generally found on the same sites as funerary mounds.

The last two chapters of *Traces de Buddhisme en Norvège* attempt to show how Buddhism reached Norway. Holmboe constructs a historical scenario, once again based on Snorri Sturlason's *Yngliga Saga*, which contains a euhemeristic account of the origin of the Norse kings. In the pre-Christian Nordic religion, *áss* was generally understood as 'god' and Ásaland as 'Land of the Gods'. In *Ynglinga Saga*, however, Sturlason (a devout Christian) maintained that the Nordic god Odin had been the king of the land of the *æsir* (sing. *áss*), the people of Ásaland, 'Land of the Æsir' or Ásaheim, 'Home of the Æsir'. Holmboe accepts the learned Icelander's explanation of Ásaland as a country located within the geographical perimeter of the 'known world'. Adducing Chinese texts as well as Greek and Latin sources (which need not be discussed here), Holmboe argues that 'le pays des Ases', located somewhere in Central Asia, adopted Buddhism. One of their kings was known as Odin, a modification of the name 'Buddha', and this monarch, he suggests, may have been venerated as a deity while still alive. This euhemeristic theory may seem far-fetched but setting aside the details of Holmboe's historical and linguistic arguments, it should be pointed out that similar theories were by no means unusual among his contemporaries – it is enough to point to Ernest Renan's hugely influential work *Vie de Jésus*, published in 1863, only six years after Holmboe's book. Moreover, it was an accepted truth among Norwegian historians at the time that 'Norse tribes' had wandered into Norway from the east. Holmboe's thesis was therefore by no means sensational.

Later in life Holmboe published two articles relevant to Buddhist studies: "En buddhistisk Legende, benyttet i et christeligt

[11] Holmboe refers to Thomson, *Western Himalaya and Tibet: A Narrative of a Journey Through the Mountains of Northern India, During the Years 1847-8*, London, 1852.

Opbyggelsesskrift" [A Buddhist legend, used in a Christian devotional scripture], published in *Christiania Videnskabs-Selskabs Forhandlinger* [Transactions of the Academy of Science and Letters in Christiania (Oslo)), 1870, and "Hexe og Dâkinî, en comparativ Fremstilling" [Witches and *ḍākinī*s, a comparative account], *ibid*., 1873. [12]

The first, comprising thirteen pages, discusses the early Christian hagiographic story of the sage Barlaam and the prince Josaphat, a story that was popular in mediaeval Western Europe, being translated not only into Latin, but also into vernacular languages such as Old Norse in the 13th century. The latter translation was well known to Norwegian academics in the nineteenth century, including Holmboe, as it had been translated into modern Norwegian in 1851 by two of his colleagues at the Royal Fredrik University.[13] By comparing the legend as found in a Greek version, attributed to St. John of Damascus, with the life of the Buddha – the latter account based on various secondary sources – Holmboe makes the parallel structure and the nature of the respective protagonists of the two narratives clear, concluding that the Greek version is based on the Buddhist biography of the Buddha, only reframing it in a Christian context. It would seem that Holmboe was among the very first (if not the first?) to see the link between the two legends (p. 350). In the context of Tibetan studies, it may be noted that he also refers to a Mongolian version, known to him from the work of P.S. Pallas on the Mongols,[14] and that he points out that the legend was known to the Mongols from Tibetan sources (p. 347, n. 2).

The second article, a comparison between Western witches and Indo-Tibetan *ḍākinī*s, is certainly the first discussion of *ḍākinī*s by a Norwegian scholar, although it is not based on primary sources, but on the 17th-century Mongolian scholar Saghang Sečen's *Chronicles* in I.J. Schmidt's German translation.[15] Holmboe is primarily interested in the account, found in this text, of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who, after a series of permutations, becomes a prince who receives the supernatural advice to go to the land of 'Udiyana' in order to find a suitable spouse among the *ḍākinī*s who inhabit that land. He arrives, but the leader of the *ḍākinī*s tells him that his wish can only be fulfilled by bringing her the heart of a certain huge bull. On his quest for the bull, he encounters a series of beautiful maidens who

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[12] Pp. 340-351 and pp. 401-421 respectively.

[13] R. Keyser and C.R. Unger, *Barlaams ok Josaphats Saga, en religiøs romantisk Fortælling,* Christiania, 1851.

[14] P.S. Pallas, *Sammlungen historischen Nachrichten über de Mongolischen Völkerschaften,* St. Petersburg, 1776.

[15] I.J. Schmidt, *Geschichte der Ost-Mongolen und ihres Fürstenhauses, verfasst von Ssanang Ssetsen Ccungtaidschi der Ordus*, St. Petersburg, 1829.

attempt to entice him to abandon his quest. Finally, he kills the bull, and after further wanderings, punctuated by encounters with supernatural beings, some appearing as old hags, others as alluring young women, he finally reaches a temple where thousands of *ḍākinī*s gather. He is ordered, however, to go to Lankapuri and obtain sixteen red human hearts; only then may he be initiated into the secret wisdom of the *ḍākinī*s. Once again, he sets forth, and in Lankapuri he finally meets the *ḍākinī* of Wisdom in the form of an old beggar woman, surrounded by fifteen other *ḍākinī*s who prepare a feast for the prince and entertain him with their dance. After further adventures, the prince is reborn as a divine emanation in the land of Tibet, whose inhabitants live in ignorance and spiritual darkness.

Turning to the European concept of witches, Holmboe points out the important role in ancient Norse beliefs played by female magicians (p. 415 ff.), and likewise the frequent description of these personages as ugly hags. The *ḍākinī*s are in the habit of gathering for nocturnal feasts of unimaginable splendor, just as the Norse witches gather at certain places, in later folk belief often identified as mountains. In both cases the participants reach their meeting place by travelling through the air, although the witches ride on animals or certain objects. Once they have gathered, they entertain themselves by dancing. The obligation to provide sixteen human hearts for the *ḍākinī*s is compared with German and Serbian folk beliefs that witches are able to steal a human heart from the owner's body in order to devour it.

Holmboe admits that there is a radical difference between the European witches, who are evil and often regarded as being in league with Satan, and the *ḍākinī*s, whose task it is to confer spiritual wisdom on those who are worthy. He concludes his article, however, by explaining this difference by assuming that after the triumph of Christianity in Norway, what was once sacred (the *ḍākinī*s, a belief of ultimately Indian origin) became diabolical (witches). He also assumes that witches were a sociological reality in the sense that the old practices were secretly continued by their adherents for a long period of time, and that their diabolical character was construed by their Christian persecutors.

It would be an easy, but useless, task to point out the many unfounded assumptions and methodological inadequacies in the works discussed above. Holmboe was (as we all are) a child of his times, and euhemeristic and diffusionist theories were common among contemporary scholars. He applied these theories on real questions of cultural contact, and given the limited number of published sources, he should be given credit for reading widely and making good use of whatever research was available. It is true that as

far as relevant primary sources were concerned, he did not have the skills and scholarship of his compatriot Christian Lassen (1800-1876), professor at the University of Bonn and a prolific translator of Sanskrit texts, and, with Burnouf, the founder of Pāli studies in Europe.[16] Nevertheless, he was the first Norwegian academic to introduce his compatriots to Buddhist studies, including the very first mention of Tibetan Buddhism. It was to be left to a later generation of scholars, in particular Sten Konow (1867-1948) and Georg Morgenstierne (1892-1978), who successively occupied the chair of Indian studies at the University of Oslo, to initiate serious philological study of Tibetan texts in Norway.[17]

[16] Eugène Burnouf and Christian Lassen, *Essai sur le pali, ou langue sacrée de la presqu'île au-delà du Gange*, Paris, 1826.

[17] On these scholars and the further development of Tibetology in Norway, see Per Kværne, "Tibetan Studies in Norway up to 1975", *Roczik Orientalistyczny Oriental Studies*, vol. 62, 1 (2009), pp. 92-100.