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Abstract of Doctoral Dissertation

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A Textual and Intertextual Study of the  
**Mudrārākṣasa**

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## Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of this dissertation is to examine a Sanskrit drama—the *Mudrārākṣasa* of Viśākhadatta—as a text that was created and has survived as part of an organic web of other texts. My work anchors firmly in the texts themselves, primarily that of the *Mudrārākṣasa*. As a corollary of this, the backbone of my methodology is classical philology. Many scholars who have constructed theories on the basis of this play—for instance about the date of its author or about the episode of ancient history that supplies its plot—have ignored the first-hand testimony of manuscripts and based their inferences only on the text reconstructed by one editor or another. A closer look at the actual texts in some cases calls into question the very premises these inferences are based on. The other fundamental component of my approach to the *Mudrārākṣasa* is the idea of intertextuality, or more accurately *transtextuality*, defined by Gérard Genette as “all that sets the text in a relationship ... with other texts.”

## The Text

While most Sanskrit plays are centred on gallant adventures and comical situations, Viśākhadatta’s drama about “Mr. Fiend and the Seal” has unadulterated intrigue and political manoeuvring at its hub. The story is based on historical events and characters of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when an upstart named Candragupta Maurya took over Pāṭaliputra, the capital of the Nanda dynasty. Tradition holds that his rise to power was expedited by an ingenious advisor called Cāṇakya or Kauṭilya, the purported author of the *Arthaśāstra*, In-

dia's classical *speculum principum*. These two personages play a central role in the *Mudrārākṣasa*, along with a third pivotal character, the minister Rākṣasa, whose name (meaning “fiend”) is not known from any independent sources.

Rākṣasa is the faithful counsellor of the Nandas, with a single remaining purpose: to avenge his deceased masters by any means whatsoever. He attaches himself to a young and ambitious barbarian prince called Malayaketu to retake the city of Pāṭaliputra and topple Candragupta. Cāṇakya, however, foils all his plots with preternatural luck and fiendish intelligence. His coldly detached pragmatism is in sharp contrast with the fallible humanity of Rākṣasa, a fiend in name only. Yet the ultimate purpose of Cāṇakya is not to annihilate Rākṣasa, but to win him over to Candragupta's side. Cāṇakya's manoeuvres discredit Rākṣasa in the eyes of the barbarian prince Malayaketu, and ultimately the minister is offered a simple if cruel choice: swear fealty to Candragupta or be responsible for the execution of his closest friend.

## The Author

Very little is known about the author of the *Mudrārākṣasa*: even his name is uncertain and so are the names of his father and grandfather. He probably belonged to a politically active family of powerful nobles and was a Brāhmaṇic adherent of the Śaiva faith. His only extant opus is the *Mudrārākṣasa*, but he may have written as many as three other dramas known only by fragmentary citations and references. One of these, the *Devīcandragupta*, has Candragupta II of the Gupta dynasty as its hero. There are two widely held hypotheses about the date of Viśākhadatta. According to one he was a contemporary of king Avantivarman of the Maukhari dynas-

ty, who reigned around the turn of the 7<sup>th</sup> century; the other says that he lived in the court of Candragupta II Vikramāditya around the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Structure of the Dissertation

Part I summarises previous knowledge about the play and its author and presents information about the text, its manuscripts, editions and commentaries as a prerequisite of in-depth study.

Part II focuses on putting the author in context, primarily from a temporal viewpoint. Here I survey the many and various theories proposed so far regarding the date of Viśākhadatta and examine the extent to which these are confirmed or negated by the evidence of this text and other texts. This part takes a close look at the clues—for example, ethnological, geographical and astronomical snippets—found in the *Mudrārākṣasa*, and also discusses the partially preserved play *Devīcandragupta*, exploring its possible date separately and examining whether it was plausibly composed by the same author as the *Mudrārākṣasa*.

Part III seeks to place the story of the *Mudrārākṣasa* in context, looking at the plethora of legends about Candragupta's accession. I show that Viśākhadatta expected his audience to have detailed knowledge of a particular branch historical/legendary tradition that is not wholly identical to any other the extant version of the Candragupta legend, and seek to identify this lost tradition.

Part IV is concerned with intertextuality in the narrower Genettian sense, discussing allusion and quotation. I scrutinise notable textual parallelisms between the *Mudrārākṣasa* and other works of Sanskrit literature. I also examine Viśākhadatta's references to *arthaśāstra* literature, and take a close look at stanzas of the

*Mudrārākṣasa* which have been included in later anthologies of Sanskrit poetry. This part ends with a brief foray into the dimension of textual connections on the level of preferred poetic metres.

Part V presents my conclusions about the way texts live and grow in an environment of other texts, then returns to the issue of Viśākhadatta's date and presents two fledgling theories that I deem worthy of further investigation.

The **Appendices** include a summary of the storyline of the *Mudrārākṣasa*; an index of the stanzas of the play with their metres and their numbers in the two principal editions; a list of all persons appearing or mentioned in the drama; and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

## Achievements

### A Lost Hypotext

My dissertation demonstrates with specific examples that the *Mudrārākṣasa* has been for much of its history a living, organically developing text, with roots extending into texts of yore and adventitious shoots popping up time and again in literary history. It is based on (legendary) historical tradition, early representatives of which—such as those preserved in the Purāṇas, the writings of the Graeco-Roman historians of Alexander the Great, and the Buddhist chronicle *Mahāvamśa*—preserve a core narrative that may be close to factual history. However, subsequent versions of the legend—told principally in Buddhist and Jaina commentarial literature—have apparently been conflated with fables about King Nanda and his ministers. Even later legends, found mostly in Jaina and secular

fable literature, are probably the result of a second cross-fertilisation between Candragupta stories and Nanda stories.

Yet another branch of the tradition, consisting of metatexts and hypertexts of the *Mudrārākṣasa*, preserve a different account, disparate witnesses of which consistently contain information that contradicts the independent traditions, yet cannot be derived from the *Mudrārākṣasa*. This indicates that an important text—on which both the *Mudrārākṣasa* and the tradition associated with it relied—has been lost. A possible reason why other branches of the tradition give a different account may be that the lost hypotext is not to be sought in fable literature but in drama. In other words, the *Mudrārākṣasa* was intended as a sort of sequel to a Sanskrit play now lost, possibly the *Pratijñācāṇakya* of Bhīma. At the end of Part III I offer a reconstruction of the Candragupta legend as told in this conjectural hypotext.

## Intertextual Links

Connectedness to older texts is also evident in the way Viśākhadatta alludes to earlier literature such as the *Mṛcchakaṭika* and Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, while later authors in turn allude to the *Mudrārākṣasa*. The body of Sanskrit poetical anthologies also preserves a number of stanzas from this play, attesting its appreciation by pre-modern audiences. The study of the attribution of such verses shows that whereas aphorisms, even when expressed in a poetic form, were freely borrowed by Sanskrit authors from earlier works, lyrical stanzas appreciated primarily on aesthetic grounds were viewed as the sole property of their original author.

## *Subtexts*

Historic audiences have also appreciated the play as a “disguised textbook” of polity/pragmatism (*nīti*): for example the *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa* of Bhoja (11<sup>th</sup> century) describes it as a *kāvyaśāstra*, “a veritable textbook among literary works,” while the unpublished commentary of Miśra Vaṭeśvara (probably 14<sup>th</sup> century) promises to break open the political knowledge sealed in “The Seal [and Rākṣasa].”

At another level, the political theme of the *Mudrārākṣasa* provided audiences of subsequent ages with events they could relate to, and supplied a comforting message that divine providence ensures stability even in times of upheaval. While great care must be exercised in attempting to utilise this drama as a source of Maurya-period history, the events described in it are almost certainly reflections of the actual events of the author’s own times.

## Alternative dating

From my review of theories about Viśākhadatta’s date I conclude that the evidence is presently insufficient, and the probable reason for this is that our knowledge of first-millennium Indian history is too patchy to recognise the clues it supplies. Nonetheless, the white spots are now fewer and smaller than they were about eighty years ago when the date debate petered out.

The presently available evidence allows us to conclude with reasonable certainty that Viśākhadatta lived no earlier than the early 4<sup>th</sup> century and no later than the late 7<sup>th</sup> century at most. Neither of the two specific monarchs thought of as potential patrons of the author in this date range—Avantivarman Maukhari and Candragupta II—is a decisively more likely candidate than the oth-

er. The early 4<sup>th</sup> century is counter-indicated by several pieces of circumstantial evidence, while the main pillar of the theory which places Viśākhadatta at Avantivarman's court (the appearance of his name or a variant of it in the concluding stanza of the *Mudrārākṣasa*) turns out to be very weak on examination of the manuscript sources.

At the close of my dissertation I present two new theories for discussion by the scholarly community. One is to place Viśākhadatta at the court of Skandagupta (~456–467), who came to power in a way reminiscent of the events described in the *Mudrārākṣasa*: he was a bastard son of Kumāragupta and probably concluded an alliance with the Vākāṭaka ruler Pravarasena II to secure by war the throne at Pāṭaliputra. Several pieces of circumstantial evidence corroborate this proposition, chief among them the bewildering name of Minister Rākṣasa, which may be a reference to Skandagupta's rival Ghaṭotkacagupta, one of the very few prominent figures of Indian history named after a *rākṣasa* demon.

An alternative is to locate the author at the Aulikara court of Mandasor in the first half of the sixth century. A pillar inscription here shows notable similarities to some stanzas of the *Mudrārākṣasa*, and Yaśodharman Viṣṇuvardhana is known as the author of the final victory over the Hephtalite Huns after a century of struggle to which the *Mudrārākṣasa* may allude. There is also epigraphic evidence of a dynasty of politically powerful hereditary ministers associated with this royal house. These counsellors may have been the prototypes for the rival ministers in the *Mudrārākṣasa*, and Viśākhadatta himself may have been a collateral member of this ministerial family.

It is also possible to combine both of the above scenarios, assuming that the hypotext of the *Mudrārākṣasa* was a dramatisation

of Candragupta's accession on the basis of Skandagupta's throne struggle, portraying the Nandas as thoroughly wicked and introducing the figure of Minister Rākṣasa as fiendish man who was defeated at the end. Viśākhadatta, in turn, may have lived at the Aulikara court where another succession war may have taken place, involving two powerful ministers supporting two pretenders. Viśākhadatta, a close relative of the two ministers, had presumably thrown in his lot with the losing side but was granted amnesty at the close of the struggle. He (as well as his fellow courtiers) would have been familiar with the hypothetical play produced under Skandagupta, and he would have written the *Mudrārākṣasa* as a continuation of the story of that play with a twist, in which the evil Rākṣasa turns out to be an ideal minister. Thus at one stroke he would have cast a favourable light on his disgraced relative and earned the favour of the triumphant new king for himself.

## Associated Publications

BALOGH DÁNIEL. 2013. 'Tracking a Devil in a Textual Maze—Citations from the *Mudrārākṣasa* in Anthologies of Sanskrit Poetry'. *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 66 (4): 264–275.

BALOGH DÁNIEL. 2015. 'Ördög úr esete a cifra cezúrákkal avagy a szanszkrit időmértékes verselés sormetszetei Viśākhadatta költészetében'. [Strange Caesurae in Sanskrit Metrical Verse—A case study in Viśākhadatta's poetry] In: KAKAS, B. & SZILÁGYI, Zs. (eds.) *Kéklő hegyek alatt lótuuszok tava — Tanulmányok Bethlenfalvy Géza tiszteletére [Lotus Lake Under Blue Mountains — Essays in Honour of Géza Bethlenfalvy]*, pp. 25–43. Budapest: L'Harmattan.