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## **UNIQUE SANSKRIT FRAGMENTS OF THE “SŪTRA OF GOLDEN LIGHT” IN THE MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION OF THE ST. PETERSBURG BRANCH OF THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES, RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES**

The unique fragments of the canonical text of the “Sūtra of Golden Light” (Skt. “Suvarṇabhāṣottama-sūtra”) came along with the manuscripts collected in Kashgar by the secretary of the Russian consulate P. I. Lavrov [1]. Now they are included in the Central Asiatic manuscript collection — “Ser India” (SI). In 1915—9 they were examined by N. D. Mironov, a member of the Asiatic Museum staff. At that period academician S. Th. Oldenburg invited N. D. Mironov to work on the manuscripts written in the Brāhmī script. These were brought to St. Petersburg by Russian scholars from East Turkestan or sent from there by Russian diplomats. In 1919 Mironov left Soviet Russia and continued his work in India, China and Europe. Before his departure he only managed to publish his paper on a Sanskrit-Tocharian bilingual fragment of the “Dharmapada” from the M. M. Berezovsky collection [2].

A number of manuscripts in Sanskrit — from the I. P. Lavrov collection, in Khotanese Saka — from the S. E. Malov collection, and in Tocharian — from the M. M. Berezovsky collection, were not available to scholars for a long time, because they were stored in Mironov's archives among his private documents. In 1930 these documents became a part of the ‘Archives of Orientalists’ established as one of the departments of the newly founded Institute of Oriental studies, the immediate successor of the Asiatic Museum.

Only in 1961, when the archives of Mironov were sorted, the above mentioned manuscripts came to the Manuscript Department of the Institute. All the fragments, however, were in a very bad condition, so the keepers were not actually able to touch them. Only in spring of 1994 the conservators of the Institute began to restore these fragments. In the course of restoration several unique manuscripts have been discovered. We were fortunate to identify some of them preliminary before restoration. Among them there are fragments from the “Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra”, the “Prātimokṣa-sūtra” of the Mahāsaṅghika school and the “Suvarṇabhāṣa-sūtra”. Fragments from the latter were chosen to be published first.

To estimate the significance of this find, it is enough to revive the history of the “Suvarṇabhāṣa-sūtra”. Up to now only two Sanskrit fragments of the sūtra in the Brāhmī

script have been published. They were found in East Turkestan and published by R. Hoernle in 1916 [3]. P. O. Skjærvø, who spent much time working on the text, informs us that he has managed to find the fragments of at least 12 copies of the sūtra written in the Brāhmī script in different manuscript depositories. The fragments are scattered all over the world. Now we can add to them our three fragments belonging to two different copies. Like in many other cases, all European scholarly researches of the Sanskrit version of the sūtra were based on comparatively late manuscripts written in the Nepalese script, dating to the 11th century A.D. J. Nobel included them in his publication (see below).

The original text of the sūtra, now including 18 chapters, was created in India in the first centuries A.D. The German scholar J. Nobel (1887—960) indicated that the textual background of the sūtra — its core — around which its whole text had been formed, was the idea of “confession” — “uposatha”, considered in the third chapter of the Sanskrit text. The practice of the confession was one of the focal points of early Buddhism prior to its division into Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. This practice was accepted by Mahāyāna in the first centuries A.D., at the time when the formation of its independent philosophical, religious and cultural tradition took place. At that time Mahāyāna overstepped the boundaries of India and extended its influence on the countries of Central Asia and Far East. This process was connected with the increase of the number of its adepts, as well as with the appearance of new preachers. Popular sūtras were widely used by them, so, step by step, stories about the early rebirths of Buddha Śākyamuni — jātakas — were being added to the “confession” chapter of the “Suvarṇabhāṣa-sūtra”. They were destined to become the basis of one of the most important philosophical doctrines of Buddhism — “Pratītyasamutpāda” — “the chain of causes and effects”. This idea was developed in the sense of Mahāyāna in chapter 5 of the sūtra, devoted to “śūnyatā”. The jātakas, on the other hand, being stories connected with everyday life, were making the preacher's work much easier. One of the most popular jātakas is about the bodhisattva who sacrificed his own body in order to feed a hungry tigress — to prevent a terrible sin — the