

Ammonios Sakkas. His Name and Origin

By J. C. Hindley

In his essay "Indische Einflüsse auf die frühchristliche Theologie"¹ E. Benz drew attention to the serious possibility that elements of Indian thought exercised a formative influence at Alexandria in the second and third centuries A. D. For a long time Alexandria had been the entrepot for an extensive trade in luxury goods between India and Rome, and it is highly likely that along with the traders some men of more reflective mind had brought a knowledge of Indian 'wisdom'. This situation would account for certain developments in neo-Platonism, and perhaps also explain some features in the teaching of the 'Christian Platonists', Clement and Origen.

The prospect which here opens up is of the greatest significance for the Christian conversation with thinkers of other religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. If there was a real contribution from Indian Buddhist thought to Christian theology during this formative period, it is vital to understand it. Our conversation with the Hindu or Buddhist will thus be illuminated, and the image of Christianity as necessarily "foreign" or "intolerant" may be somewhat modified.

The importance of Benz's thesis in the context of the Christian mission demands that its foundations be securely laid. The general picture of traffic between India and Alexandria is clear enough, and the image of India as the source of 'wisdom' is fairly established in the writers of the period, whether Christian or not. But when Benz attempts to pinpoint Ammonios Sakkas as the philosopher through whom this Indian influence assumed a special significance, doubts arise.

Ammonios Sakkas was certainly the teacher of Plotinus,² and if he did not teach Origen the Christian father,³ he certainly contributed to the intellectual atmosphere of the Alexandria in which Origen studied and taught.

In tracing a link between Ammonios and India, Benz relies on an article by E. Seeberg.⁴ The argument is basically a linguistic one. The name Sakkas, claims Seeberg, cannot be understood as Greek at all. It is not found elsewhere, and it cannot mean 'Sackträger'. Theodoret, it is true, had interpreted it in this or a similar way. He writes:⁵

Ἐπὶ τούτου δὲ (sc. Emp. Commodus) Ἀμμώνιος ὁ ἐπίκλην Σακκάς τοὺς σάκκους καταλιπὼν, οἷς μετέφερε τοὺς πυροὺς, τὸν φιλόσοφον ἠπάσατο βίον.

¹ Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur: Abhandlungen der Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse. 1951/3.

² Porphyrios, Vita Plotini, 3.

³ The evidence is conflicting. Many scholars hold there was a pagan Origen, and quite possibly two philosophers named Ammonios. Cf. *H. E. W. Turner, The Pattern of Christian Truth* p. 464 ff., and *H. Dörrie, "Ammonios der Lehrer Plotins"*, in *Hermes* vol. 83, 1955, Beilage 3 p. 468.

⁴ "Ammonios Sakas", in *ZKG* 61, 1942, p. 136 ff.

⁵ *Graecarum affectionum curatio, Sermo VI. M PG* 83, 868 B.

In Seeberg's view this is a poor joke, based on ignorance of the true meaning of *Σακκῆς* which had been lost by the time Theodoret wrote.

Seeberg goes on to argue that in fact this odd name is to be derived from India. Two possible explanations are available. The first is that *Σακκῆς* is a misreading for *Σακας*, the latter being the clan name of a branch of the Aryan Scyths (*οἱ Σακαι*) who had ruled in western India from the first century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. The word in this form occurs as a proper name, referring to this clan in Xenophon,⁶ and Seeberg suggests that in spite of his Egyptian first name, Ammonios Sakas (sic) was actually an Aryan Scyth who (or whose family) had emigrated to Egypt.

The alternative explanation avoids the difficulty of the single 'k' and appears to be preferred by the Indologist H. Lüders, whom Seeberg quotes. Lüders points out that Buddha came from the clan Shakya, and that in the west this clan became known as Sakka. The Buddha himself was sometimes referred to as Sakkamuni (i. e. "the wise man from the clan Shakya"), and his monks were called shakya-bhiksu or shakya-putra. Seeberg summarises this opinion thus:

"H. Lüders war der Ansicht, daß *Σακας* (sic!) als Zunamen von Ammonios den indischen Mönch bezeichnen oder doch auf solche geistigen Zusammenhänge des Ammonios auch bereits sprachlich hinweisen könne. Dann würde also der fragliche Zuname des Ammonios die Zugehörigkeit zu Buddha, der aus der Familie der Shakya stammt, bedeuten."

This derivation is intriguing, but is there any evidence for it beyond certain traces of Indian ideas which can be found in the very hypothetical reconstructions which are possible of Ammonios's teaching? Admittedly, Porphyrios suggests that Ammonios aroused an interest in Indian philosophy on the part of Plotinus:

καὶ ἐπ' ἐκείνης τῆς ἡμέρας συνεχῶς τῷ Ἀμμωνίῳ παραμένοντα (sc. τὸν Πλωτίνον) τοσαύτην ἔξιν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ κτήσασθαι, ὡς καὶ τῆς παρὰ τοῖς Πέρσαις ἐπιτηδευομένης πείραν λαβεῖν σπεῦσαι καὶ τῆς παρ' Ἰνδοῖς κατορθουμένης.⁷

This passage is certainly consonant with the idea that Ammonios was a Buddhist monk, but it need mean no more than that Ammonios had stimulated an interest in those eastern ideas which had percolated by another route to Alexandria.

Against this indecisive passage must be set the overriding fact that the Indian derivation is in clear contradiction with two clear testimonies we possess concerning Ammonios, viz:

1. His chief name is unmistakably Egyptian, and Ammianus Marcellinus gives his home as Bruchion, a suburb of Alexandria.⁸

2. Theodoret found no difficulty in supposing that *Σακκῆς* was etymologically connected with *σάκκος*.

The evidence of both Ammianus and Theodoret has been roughly handled in an article by H. Dörrie,⁹ though in a way which can afford no comfort to Seeberg. Dörrie dismisses the views of Seeberg and Benz as "weit phantasievoller als die antike Legenden-Bildung". He does not discuss the derivation of Sakkas at all, except to point out that it is never found elsewhere as a Beiname. He holds therefore that the references in both Theodoret and Ammianus (the only ones to give the name Sakkas) are mistaken. Theodoret, he suggests, invented the name in order to discredit the founder of Neoplatonism, Christianity's chief rival, and a later reader

⁶ Institutio Cyri V ii 25, iii 11, 22 f., 38f.; VII v 51.

⁷ Loc. cit.

⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus XXII 16, 16.

⁹ V. note 3.

interpolated the text of Ammianus Marcellinus, so as to transform an allusion to Ammonios the grammarian into the Ammonios referred to by Theodoret as Sakkas.

I wonder whether so extreme a course is justified. If jibes are to sting, they must have some basis in fact: would there have been any point in Theodoret's remark if he had invented the name Sakkas?

As for Ammianus, he writes as follows:

“Unde (sc. Bruchion) Aristarchus grammaticae rei donis excellens et Saccas Ammonius Plotini magister alique plurimi scriptores multorum in litteris nobilium studiorum, inter quos Chalcenterus eminuit Didymus.”

The order of the names, Saccas Ammonius, is admittedly difficult. Is Dörrie's interpolation hypothesis any easier? Not only did the interpolator get the words in the wrong order (explicable no doubt as a result of a gloss entering the text), but he used a name which, on Dörrie's own view had been invented by Theodoret, and for which we have no other evidence. Nor is the point that the other names in this list are those of grammarians quite so decisive as it seems. Ammianus is not primarily giving here a record of grammarians, but is noting distinguished natives of Bruchion. Ammonios Sakkas may have slipped in naturally, if illogically, because of his eminence.

The order of his names can, I think, be explained by a modification of the view advanced by Seeberg and Benz. Porphyrios, in what appears as a quotation from Longinus,¹⁰ mentions two philosophers named Ammonios, one a Platonist and the other an Aristotelian. The strange word order might then be explained as indicating which Ammonios Ammianus had in mind, — Ammonios the sack-carrier. It is by no means impossible that Ammianus was reproducing a Greek source which read *ὁ Σακκῆς Ἀμμώνιος*,¹¹ and that the word *Σακκῆς* was originally an attributive noun which became adopted as a surname or nickname. Porphyrios would not unnaturally have suppressed it in the interests of defending his neoplatonist forbears, but we should accept it as part of the authentic tradition regarding Ammonios.

If this is correct, Seeberg's arguments regarding the etymology of the name have to be met. His reasoning depends on the assertion that the word *Σακκῆς* cannot etymologically be placed in a Greek context. If however it can be shown that this word, though unknown in literary Greek, is a good demotic form, I submit that the whole case for turning to an etymology as remote as Seeberg suggests disappears.

In fact evidence, slight but sufficient, is available to illustrate the word *σακκῆς* in demotic Greek, meaning a “maker or carrier of sacks.”

In general it should be remembered that in a corn-growing area like Egypt the carriers were an important part of the economy. Payment for transport by sacks (*σακκηγία*) and the men who do this work (*οἱ σακκηγοῦντες*) are fairly frequently mentioned in the papyri.¹² The complex transport organisation involved with its guilds of *καμηλοτρόφοι*, *ὄνηλάται* and so on has been described by Rostowzew.¹³

At this point the evidence becomes sketchy, but at the very bottom of the organisation must have come the artisan who manufactured the sacks, and the poor man, who, not owning a camel or a donkey, carried them on foot. It can be shown that such a man would, in demotic Greek, be called *σακκῆς*.

¹⁰ Vita Plotini, 20.

¹¹ I am indebted to Mr. C. H. Roberts of St. John's College, Oxford, sometime University Reader in Papyrology, for this suggestion.

¹² E. g. Papyri Fiorentini no. 364, Tebtunies Papyri nos. 277, 356, 375, 585. P. Lond. no. 900.

¹³ Archiv für Papyrusforschung vol. III p. 219 f.

On the one hand there is the general fact, established by B. Olsson,¹⁴ from the papyri, that a whole series of nouns ending in *-ās* existed, to denote the practitioners of particular trades, — *λιβανᾶς* (Händler mit Weihrauch), *στροβιλᾶς* (Verkäufer von *στροβίλοι*), *μολυβᾶς* (Bleiarbeiter), etc. These are non-literary words and Olsson is able to quote twenty-one examples, none of which occurred in Liddell and Scott's Lexicon at the time when he wrote. The great majority of them belong to the second and third century papyri. Editors of the papyri often put them down as proper names, but the number and variety of examples lead Olsson to the conclusion "daß die Gewerbenamen auf *-ās* seit dem 1 Jahr. n. Chr. sich in ständigem Zuwachs befinden."

This general conclusion alone might justify us in including *σακκᾶς* as such a formation. But the word itself in fact occurs, in a papyrus and on an inscription. The papyrus¹⁵ is dated to the fourth century, and runs:

Μεχειρ
λογοσ Διεσκορον του σακκα
ἐλαβι τριχια λιτρασ
σακκων εικοσι πεντε
 5. *προς λιτρασ δεκα απ ουσιασ*
ωσ εκαστου σακκου προς λ 3
τ' του σακκου
ωσαρι τελου σακκα κατα
σακκων ταλαντα δεκαπεντε.

This fragment is from an account, apparently for materials used in sack-making. In line 2 Kenyon took the word *σακκα* as a proper noun, printing it *Σακκᾶ*. But while here the translation "Dieskoros son of Sakkas" is tolerable, this man cannot be referred to simply by his patronymic in line 8: his personal name (Dieskoros) would have had to be repeated. It follows that *σακκᾶ* in line 8 cannot be a proper name. The vital phrase for our purposes is *τελου σακκα*. *τελου* is a regular abbreviation for the genitive *τέλουσ*, and the phrase *τέλουσ σακκᾶ* would mean the "tax payable by a sack-maker." The expression is easily understood from the fact that from Diocletians reign onwards every trade in the empire had to pay its appropriate tax. It is natural, therefore, to suppose that in line 2 also *σακκᾶσ* means "sack-maker", and this entirely squares with the conclusions reached by Olsson.¹⁶

The inscription is from a Christian sarcophagus found in the necropolis of Korykos.¹⁷ It runs thus:

σωματοθηκι Ιωαννου σακκα κ(αι) κεραμεοσ
νειου Ενθυμιου σακα

The sarcophagus is a highly ornamented one, taken over from a previous pagan burial, and the inscription has been added rather crudely in the spaces between the floral reliefs. This fact, incidentally, explains the unexpected spelling of the last word. It is quite evident from the line drawing of the sarcophagus supplied by Keil and Wilhelm that the mason just did not have room for the full spelling, *σακκα*, between one fancy scroll and the next: he had either to omit one 'k' or seriously reduce the size of lettering, and chose the former alternative. The tomb inscriptions

¹⁴ Aegyptus vol. VI, 1925 p. 247: "Die Gewerbenamen auf *-ās* in den Papyri".

¹⁵ P. Lond. no. 427. Greek Papyri in the British Museum (ed. F. G. Kenyon) vol. II, p. 312.

¹⁶ For details in the translation and interpretation of this papyrus I am indebted to Mr. C. H. Roberts.

¹⁷ Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua: Denkmäler aus dem rauhen Kilikien (hg. von J. Keil und A. Wilhelm), no. 470, p. 169.

of Korykos have not been accurately dated, but the majority are attributed by the editors to "frühbyzantinischer Zeit".

I suggest that the evidence, though meagre, is sufficient to justify our treating the name Sakkas as a Greek word, indicating that its holder had emerged from the humble occupation of sack-maker or porter. In other words, Theodoret's jibe fitted the facts of the case. That such an origin for a philosopher is intrinsically impossible we may hardly affirm for an age when one of the most eminent teachers among the pagans had been a slave and among the Christians, a tent-maker.

I conclude that the name Ammonios Sakkas can be perfectly well understood within the context of Greek-speaking Egypt. Certain facts about him definitely tell against the theory that he was Indian by race or adoption. There is therefore no reason for the etymological theories of Seeberg and Lüders.

These observations do not of course in themselves show that Ammonios was uninfluenced by Buddhism, or that there was no Indian influence at Alexandria in the second century. They do suggest, however, that the name Sakkas cannot be used as a proof of such influence.