

NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE TEXTUAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE *SUŚRUTA SAMHITĀ*

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The *Suśrutasaṃhitā* is one of the foundational treatises of Āyurveda. When we study the text, we normally rely on printed texts that were produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially the editions of Trikamji Acharya. The editions are useful for getting the general meaning of the text, but when one goes into detail, and this can sometimes be very important, there are many problems of language, grammar and variation. Even Candraṭa, writing at the turn of the eleventh century, was troubled by the many difficulties with the quality of the text before him, and he wrote a work of textual criticism in an attempt to clarify the work. In 2006, a notice was published about four newly discovered manuscripts of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* that have been found in Kathmandu, Nepal. One of these manuscripts seems to date to the ninth century, and the others are also early. These manuscripts are almost a thousand years earlier than any other evidence that has been used to constitute the text of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*. Even a very cursory examination of the new Nepalese evidence shows surprising new facts about the history of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*.

Key words: Āyurveda, Cataloguing project, Collation, Evaluation of medicine mss, Field work, Nepal palm-leaf mss, Recension, Survey, *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, Textual criticism

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE *SUŚRUTASAMHITĀ*

The *Suśruta-saṃhitā*, “The Compendium of Suśruta,” is a world classic of the history of science. It was composed in South Asia, in the Sanskrit language, and its earliest content may date from about 250 BC. It was reedited several times until about 500 AD, when the text achieved the general form in which we have it today.¹

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not distinguished in his footnotes, variants being infrequently noted, normally indiscriminately as “another reading (Skt. *iti pā[ṭhāntaram]*),” alongside selected readings and comments from medieval commentators. For all its shortcomings, like many vulgates, Ācārya’s edition is enormously valuable, and represents what almost all scholars since 1915 have treated as the text of this classic work.

The first printed translation of a part of the *SS* was that of Hessler into Latin, that followed a decade after the *editio princeps*.⁹ Apart from numerous translations into Indian languages, Meulenbeld (1999–2002: Ib: 314–5) lists eleven translations into non-Indian languages, including one into Japanese, to which can be added the recent translations by Sharma (1999–2001), by Srikantha Murthy (2000–2002), and my own selected translations for Penguin Classics.¹⁰

THE PROBLEM

In spite of the importance and deserved fame of the *SS*, there remain fundamental problems about the text that gnaw at the base of all other historical and cultural claims based on it. In the introduction to my own translated section of the *SS*’s chapter “On Breath and Wind”, I made the following observations:¹¹

One of the most striking features to the reader of this section of Suśruta’s *Compendium* is the poor state of the text. By the time of the commentators Gayadāsa (c. 1000) and Dalhaṇa (c. 12th century) many variant readings were in circulation for this part of the text, and these commentators note that the manuscripts available to them had alternative readings to almost every verse. Other parts of Suśruta’s *Compendium* are also peppered with uncertain readings, but perhaps not to the same degree as the present chapter. The variability of Suśruta’s text was so obvious even a millennium ago that it spurred the creation of a work of medieval textual criticism, Candrāṭa’s *Suśrutapāṭhaśuddhi*, ‘Correction of the readings in Suśruta’, probably written at about the turn of the eleventh century.¹² What all this means for the history of this important text is unclear at present: in the absence of a critical edition and study of the history of the work we can only speculate about the possible causes for this high density of variations.

Although the *SS* holds a position of great importance in the history of medicine, the textual foundations of the work itself are insecure and its interpretation deeply problematic. Meulenbeld has drawn attention to many of these difficulties and to the secondary literature in which scholars have mostly, it must be said, floundered with these questions.¹³ Sharma has surveyed the ways in which commentators on Sanskrit medical texts can provide important evidence for the history of the texts.¹⁴

The discovery of this new, early manuscript for part of the *SS* brings a new focus and urgency to the problem. For the first time, we have textual evidence that potentially takes our knowledge of this work back a thousand years earlier than any previously known evidence. It is important, to say the least, to evaluate this new evidence, and to attempt to clarify the textual history of the *SS*.

Amongst many interesting questions that the study of this manuscript would allow one to address, Meulenbeld has noted that a ninth-century *SS* manuscript would enable us to examine whether or not the medical historian Prof. P. V. Sharma is right in asserting that the vulgate text represents a version updated by the tenth-century author Candraṭa.¹⁷

A preliminary examination of Kaiser Shamsheer NAK 9/699 has already revealed a startling fact. It systematically lacks the standard phrase, *yathovāca bhagavān dhanvantariḥ* “as the sage Dhanvantari declared,” that appears at the start of all chapters in the vulgate text, and that casts the entire work as a series of lectures made by the ancient sage Dhanvantari. This basic change to the text entirely re-frames the work, and throws into question the standard traditional accounts of the origin of the work. Furthermore, preliminary consultation with the Vienna *Carakasamḥitā* project suggests that some of the *Carakasamḥitā* manuscripts collected by that project also lack the parallel framing *Ātreya* narrative that is associated with the Caraka text.¹⁸ This points to the possible existence of a critically important editorial moment in the history of these texts, perhaps in the tenth century, when they were re-framed to fit a particular narrative of origin.¹⁹

THE WIDER MANUSCRIPT BASE

Although the discovery of this thousand-year old manuscript and its companions in Kathmandu is exciting and likely to be of great importance for the study of the text, “manuscripts should be weighed, not counted”.²⁰ At a rough estimate, there may be as many as two hundred manuscripts of the *SS* in existence in libraries worldwide.²¹ Many, if not most of these are fragmentary or partial. Nevertheless, it is important to study previously unexamined manuscript evidence for the portion of the text covered by Kaiser Shamsheer NAK 9/699.

As West so wisely noted,²²

Of the whole collating project, the hardest part to carry out with complete success is probably the business of finding out what manuscripts there are.

that it becomes pointless to proceed. In that case, a diplomatic transcription of Kaiser Shamsheer NAK 9/699 can form the basis for further collation. This work on the Nepalese manuscripts requires skills in reading Transitional Gupta script.

Survey of MSS

A survey of discoverable manuscripts of the *SS* needs to be developed in consultation with the *New Catalogus Catalogorum* project in Chennai, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Delhi and the National Mission for Manuscripts (NAMAMI), also in Delhi. The IGNCA has very large holdings of microfilmed Sanskrit manuscripts, including medical materials, and is likely to have several *SS* manuscripts microfilmed in its collection.

The focus of the research as outlined here is on evaluating the new textual data from Kaiser Shamsheer NAK 9/699 and the accompanying Nepalese MSS. However, the data of the other Nepalese manuscripts is likely to be of similar importance and their inclusion may enable a full continuous “Nepalese” text of the *SS* to be edited.

A survey of *SS* manuscripts from all other known repositories would, in itself, be a most valuable research tool.²⁵

Manuscript evaluation

Once a reasonably comprehensive list of existing *SS* manuscripts has been developed, and some have been acquired in microfilm or digitally, the work of weighing them can be undertaken. This is carried out by spot-collating a small number of relatively short passages from various parts of the work. This work has a specific goal, namely to establish, as far as possible, relationships between the manuscripts, and especially to discover any manuscripts that might belong with NAK 9/699 as early witnesses to the text of the *SS*.

Fieldwork

Visits to manuscript libraries India and Nepal, and resource-centres such as the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi, afford the opportunity of examining, photographing and/or collating *SS* manuscripts at the Kaiser Shamsheer and other repositories. Collections where *SS* MSS are already known to exist include the Bhandarkar Institute (Pune, 5 partial MSS), the

14. Sharma 2005.
15. Dimitrov and Tamot 2007: 33.
16. The Kaiser Shamsheer National Archives of Kathmandu accession numbers for these manuscripts are 9/699, 5/333, 5/334 and 1/1146.
17. Personal communication. For more detail on this view, see Meulenbeld 1999–2002: Ia, 341. Sharma's view in his publications of 1975: 66–7 and 1992: 200–1.
18. Prof. Dr Karin Preisendanz, personal communication.
19. Cf. the study by Zysk 1999.
20. West 1973: 49.
21. Biswas and Prajapati (1998) provide the most up-to-date published listing of catalogued Sanskrit manuscript collections.
22. West 1973: 64.
23. Raghavan *et al.* 1949–.
24. Kosambi 2000 [1948]: 10: "It is a general rule (Kosambi's law!) that the actual use-value of a MS is inversely proportional to the fuss made in lending it."
25. The value of this type of codicological research is discussed in Wujastyk (forthcoming).

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