ÑĀṆAPPABHĀ:
A Felicitation Volume in Honour of Venerable Dr. Pategama Gnanarama Mahā Thera

Editors
Venerable Dr. Rangama Chandawimala Thera
Professor Chandima Wijebandara

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“There are Dhamma-experts and meditators. And there are those who praise only the Dhamma-experts but also meditators but you should train yourselves in the Dhamma. Though we ourselves are Dhamma-experts, we will praise the outstanding men who have personal contact with the deathless elements.

“And the other monastics train themselves that they and ourselves are meditators, also those monks who are meditators. And why? Such persons are rare in this world, by their wisdom clearly understanding difficult subjects.”

(Numerical Discourses on the Highest Truth by NyanaponikaThero, p. 105)

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What does amisā/misā mean in Aśokan
Minor Rock Edict 1?

Bryan Levman

Abstract

Philology cannot operate in a vacuum; sometimes context is the key to resolving a lexical conundrum. The publication of Falk’s new study on the Aśokan sites provides the key to understanding the opposition between two Prakrit words amisā and misā. Usually derived from Sanskrit (a)-miśra “(un)–mixed” — and usually translated as “Formerly the gods mingled with men and now they do not” — the context much better suits a derivation from Skt. mṛṣā (“false”, “untrue”). Minor Rock Edict 1 was published in several out–of–the–way cultic folk festival locations, where sacrifices were performed and mystic communions with the old gods carried out. In this edict Aśoka is admonishing his people against engaging in these sacrificial rituals to the gods (once considered a–misā “true”, with overtones of āmiśa “enjoyment”, “material benefit”), in light of the new Buddhist teachings which deposes these old ideas (now considered misā or “false”) in favour of the new Dharma. The sense of the passage, therefore, is that formerly gods and/or men were pure and/or objects of enjoyment, but now they are recognized as fraudulent, due to Aśoka’s diligence.

Introduction

As India’s earliest decipherable writings, the Aśokan rock inscriptions are an indispensable primary witness to the Indian polity of the third century B.C. Yet in many cases — because of the difficulty of interpreting this earliest extant Middle Indic dialect and the lack of any other contemporary comparative data — although we are relatively certain of what Aśoka said, we are unsure of what he meant. In the hundred and fifty years or so since the discovery of the first inscriptions, a voluminous literature (for a partial list, see Falk 2006, p. 14–54) has evolved translating and explaining various historical, religious, archaeological, cultural and philological ramifications of the edicts, but there are still many points of disagreement, especially on semantic issues. This paper will examine one of these conundrums from Minor Rock Edict 1 (MRE 1) in some detail, to show how widely divergent interpretations can be extrapolated from the same linguistic data.
Semantic Ambiguity

The Minor Rock Edicts (MRE) are amongst the oldest (Lamotte 1988, 225; Norman 1984–85, 1) preserved texts written in Indian characters (Brāhmī script); they have been found in 17 sites in various core areas of the Mauryan realm in caves, hilltops and sacred places associated with folk–religious festivals which involved animal and/or human sacrifice, alcohol and drug use and sexual practice (Falk 2006, 55–57). Falk believes that Aśoka had the edicts placed in these locales to oppose the popular cults and encourage the following of the Buddhist dharma. However he admits that the text, which talks about the gods “formerly not [being] mingled with men, but now they are mingled”, is perplexing. “What sense does it make in a hidden place to read or be told how to mingle with the gods? It seems quite possible that the men of old were as puzzled as we are when first confronted with this text.” (ibid, p. 55). He concludes that, “When Aśoka speaks of ‘mingling with the gods’ at places where human media dance and communicate in the name of gods, everyone must have understood the seemingly unconventional phraseology in the only sense Aśoka can have had in mind: getting in touch with the gods at a festival where media are possessed by superhuman powers is not appropriate. Full contact with heaven is only reached by following the precepts of a Buddhist layman.” (57).

The particular passage which Falk refers to has been the subject of much perplexity since Bühler published his translation on MRE 1 in 1894–95 (140–41). Since then many additional copies of the MRE have been discovered, reprinted in Sircar (1979, 132f) and Andersen (1990, 114). The passage in question is section E in

1 Falk lists 16 sites, but Sircar (1979, 132 f.) has 17 sites.
2 A translation of the Rūpānāth version in Hultsch (1969, 167) is provided to give overall context, with Hultsch’s section markings which will be adopted to in this paper (for MRE 1 and other REs):

Devanāmaipṛya speaks thus.
Two and a half years and somewhat more (have passed) since I am openly a Sākya.
But (I had) not been very zealous.
But a year and somewhat more (has passed) since I have visited the Saṅgha and have been very zealous.
Those gods who during that time have been unmixed (with men) in Jambudīpa, have now been made (by me) mingled (with them). For this is the fruit of zeal.
And this cannot be reached by (persons of) high rank (alone), (but) even a lowly (person) is able to attain even the great heaven if he is zealous.
And for the following purpose has (this) proclamation been issued, (that) both the lowly and the exalted may be zealous, and (that) even (my) borderers may know (it), (and) that this same zeal may be of long duration.
For, this matter will (be made by me to) progress, and will (be made to) progress considerably; it will (be made to) progress to at least one and a half.
And cause ye this matter to be engraved on rocks where an occasion presents itself.
And (wherever) there are stone pillars here, it must be caused to be engraved on stone pillars.
And according to the letter of this (proclamation) (you) must dispatch (an officer) everywhere as far as your district (extends).
(This) proclamation was issued by (me) on tour. 256 (nights) (had then been) spent on tour.
Hultsch (1969, 168). Appendix One lists the seventeen versions in alphabetical order. There are two general “recensions” of the edict of which the Rūpānāth version may be considered typical of one group and Brahmagiri of the other.

The Rūpānāth version reads: yā imāya kālāya Jambudīpasi amīṣā devā hūṣu te dānī misā katā pakamasi hi esa phale which is translated by Hultsch as “Those gods who during that time have been unminged (with men) in Jambudīpā, have now been made (by me) mingled (with them). For this is the fruit of zeal.” (168). The Brahmagiri version reads: imīna cu kālana amīṣā samānā munisā Jambudīpasi misā devehi pakamasa hi iyaam phale, translated by Hultsch as “But men in Jambudīpā, being during that time unminged, (are now) mingled with the gods. For this is the fruit of zeal.” (177) Most modern translators follow this general (positive) meaning, deriving (a)misā < (a)mīsa3, namely that a previous

3 Mookherji (1928, 110–13) has, “Thus during this time the people in Jambudīpā who had remained un-associated with the gods became associated with the gods. Of exertion, indeed, is this the result?” He suggests that the literal interpretation may also have a secondary meaning, i.e., that “men whose gods were disinterested had (sic) become men whose gods were united”, i.e., the sects were no longer fighting among themselves (111). Sircar 1979: Erragudi translation: “Those men, who were unminged [with gods] during this period, have now been mingled with gods. This is [the result] of [my] exertion [in the cause of Dharma].” (11); Maski version: “In Jambu-dvipa those gods, who were formerly unminged [with men], have now become mingled [with them].” (62); Ahirvārī version: “During this period of time (i.e., a little over one year) [the people who were not conmmingled with the gods in Jambu-dvīpa (i.e., in Asoka’s empire) have been made conmmingled with the gods. This is [the result] of (my, i.e., Asoka’s) exertion in the cause of Dharma.” (82); Delhi version: “Those men, who were unminged with the gods in Jambu-dvīpa during the past age, have been mixed with the gods.” (85); Gujarā version: “Devānāṃpiyā men (i.e., subjects) in Jambu-dvīpa, who had been unminged with the gods during this period, were made [by him] mingled with the gods. This is the result of [his] exertion [in the cause of Dharma].” (92); Pāṇḍurājīyām version: “Up to this time, the gods were not mingled with men in Jambu-dvīpa.” (103); Rājula-Mandagiri version: damaged, thought to be the same asErragudi (107); brackets in original. Bloch synthesizes both recensions as follows: 1) “Or dans l’Inde les dieux (qui) n’étaient pas mêlés a cette époque aux hommes, (ils) s’y sont maintenant mêlés. Car c’est là le résultat du zèle.” and 2) “Or dans l’Inde les hommes non mêlés auparavant aux dieux, (ils) s’y sont maintenant mêlés. Car c’est là le résultat du zèle.” (1950 146–47); Thapar presents a conflated of the various versions: “The gods, who in India up to this time did not associate with men, now mingle with them, and this is the result of my efforts.” (1977, 259); Basak does the same: “Up to this time the gods in Jambudīpā (India) had remained un-mixed or un-associated (with men); they now have become associated with men. For, this is the result of exertion or enterprise.” (1959, 140), Schmithausen takes the expression misā devehi to mean attainment of heaven after death” and Norman agrees (quoted in Deshpande 2009, footnote 5; from Norman 1997, 82). Wright (2000, 335) interprets it as Asoka “offering the living (*amīśadevā) a chance to meet their Maker (*miśradevā) as a metaphor for a Buddhist regeneration here on earth, coupled with a scarcely veiled threat”. In Andersen’s Critical Edition he gives no translation, but provides a dictionary at the back where he defines misa as “mixed”, misamadeva as “god associated (with)”, misibhīta as “mixed, coupled, united” and amīsa as “unmixed, unminged”. He does not even consider an alternative definition of misa (1990, 138, 164; see below). Woolner considers both possibilities (1924, 123, s.v. misa), “mixed” and “false appearance”. and (page 65, s.v. amīsa), “unmixed” and “true, not false”.

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negative situation is now made positive, because of the efforts of Asoka, Falk, as we have seen above, trying to reconcile the locations of the inscriptions with the content, takes the meaning in an opposite sense; overzealousness is causing people to be possessed by the gods, whereas previously this was not the case.

Now, none of the "orthodox" readings make sense in the light of the overall message, which is a call to persons of both high and low rank to be zealous and progress in the Buddhist Dhāraṇā. Asoka says that he has been a Buddhist for two and a half years; although at first he wasn't zealous, in the last year he has devoted himself to the Satyaggahī — next follows our section outlined above — and he ends with an exhortation to all citizens to show more zeal. What do the gods have to do with the Buddhist Dhāraṇā? Lévi suggests that in fact Asoka was referring to "kings" by the word devā and deśev̄ī (1911, 124).6 Hultzsch (1969, 168, footnote 1) opposes this view on the grounds that rāja is the usual word employed for kings; devā must therefore refer to the gods with whom Hultzsch identifies the divini rājā (heavenly forms) of the fourth Rock Edict (RE4, section B), apparently some kind of religious fantasy to promote ahiṃsā, which nevertheless was not as effective as Asoka's instruction in dharmic virtues which "have all increased as never before for many centuries" (Thapar 1997, 251, translating RE 4). Senart also demurs with Lévi (1916, 437) for other reasons (see below). In a convincing argument, Filliozat (1967, 35f) argues in favour of Lévi's position, contending that devā refers to Asoka himself; traditionally Indian kings were forbidden to associate with the priests in any way. Asoka, a Buddhist, broke this rule during his 256 day tour (ibid, 19) of the Buddhist Satyaggahī (Section N of MRE II). The word devā could not refer to the gods as they have always participated in the affairs of men — Buddhist or Aryan — so the edict's statement that at one time they had not, is non-sensical (38).

Lévi's and Filliozat's solution has the advantage of making sense in the immediate literary context: just as the king now mixes with ordinary people, so all, high and low, should put forth effort and zeal in the establishment of the Dhāraṇā. But it does not seem to respond to the locational context which Falk has outlined, i.e., what does Asoka's new association with men have to do with the cultic sites where the stones were located? Except in the most general terms, it seems to have no relevance.

All MREs are consistent in their opposition of amitiṣā with miṣā and the past with the present. The word miṣā, can be derived from Skt. miṣū, but it could also be derived from Skt. miṣam, meaning "pretext disguise, deceit, trick fraud, false or outward appearance" (MW); this word is undoubtedly related to Skt. mṛṣā,

4 Deshpande 2009, 21 says that "Lévi's interpretation is not to be easily cast aside."

5 The Prakrit word miṣā is attested in Sheth (1963, 690) with the meaning of bahānā (Hindi: "excuse, pretext; evasion, subterfuge"); chā (Skt.: cau̯a), meaning "deceit, fraud, pretext, trick"; yuṣā (Skt.: yudhā) meaning "deceit, fraud, deception," etc., while miṣā < miṣā is not found here. In Pichsel the Prakrit reflex of mṛṣā is miṣā with a long ː- (1981, §64); presumably the long ː- compensates for the loss of the ː- with a short ː- the derivation is from miṣā (§365). The negativized form of miṣam, amaṣ, is both an adjective ("free from guilt") and a noun amaṣam meaning "an object of worldly enjoyment, luxury; honesty, absence of fraud or deceit; flesh" (Apte), related to amaṣam ("meat"); "enjoyment"; "severe lust"; "object of enjoyment"; "self"; "a pleasing of beautiful object"; "longing"; etc. (for which it is an alternative spelling, per MW). Pichsel was the first to suggest this, translating the Śuddhāpara version, "but during this time the men who were (considered) true in Jambudvīpa (have been made to appear) false together with the gods." (1894–95, 140). Per Pichsel (141) this would read in Sanskrit, etena tu keśamiva sahā prajā mṛṣā [india] devāḥ [asoka]. In his notes, he goes on to clarify: "The general meaning is that those men who were considered to be true, i.e., true prophets and instructors, like the ascetics and brāhmaṇas teaching the Vaiṣṇavas, Saivais and other sects, were deprived of their high position by the efforts of Asoka and lost the confidence of the people, and their gods fell with them." Bhühl's interpretation has the advantage of making equal sense regardless of whether the subject is the deva or gods or muniṣā, men. The Rājapālī edict, for example, would translate as, "At that time the gods were pure, now they have been shown to be deceitful." When men, mūryuṣā appears in the instrumental case (as in Gavilmāth), it would translate as "At that time in India, gods were (considered) pure by men, now they are taken to be deceitful." amaṣ < miṣā has the added advantage of punning on the paraśām with the meanings outlined above, i.e., "an object of worldly enjoyment". For other translations see Appendix two.

Senart believed that Asoka calling himself deva was inconsistent with "le style simple et lent qu’affecteonne Piyadāsi" (1916, 439). He translates the reconstructed Maksi version as "Ceux qui précédemment étaient dans l’Inde de véritables dieux sont maintenant des dieux déchus." (442, "Those who in India were previously real gods are now fallen gods"). To Hultzsch's objection that mṛṣā-hāthā could not appear as mṛṣā-hāṭā (as inscribed at Maksi) per the Panjāmi rule prohibiting the change of the final -i of indeclinables to -i (in Hultzsch 1969, 168, footnote 4). Lévi (1911, 123), who disagrees with Bhühl's interpretation (outlined below) makes the point that mṛṣā is only known in Prakrit under the form māṣā (it appears in this form in the Bhdrāra edict), but in fact per Pichsel 355 it (māṣā) is a Prakrit word standing for Skt. mṛṣā. The word māṣā in Skt. is attested in AMāmm, as mūrya (Pichsel 64), with a māṃ

6 The word for "mixed" in NIA (Hindi) is miṣā.

7 So translating Rājapālī as "At that time the gods were an object of worldly enjoyment, now they have been shown to be deceitful." amaṣam also means "meat" and may refer to the blood sacrifice.
BRIAN LEYMAN: WHAT DOES AMITASĀ MEAN IN AĐIKAṆ MINOR ROCK EDICT?

1), Senarat responds that it is inappropriate to apply such rules to these colloquial inscriptions: in any case, if the root word is mīsa, there is no such objection, and the strange form mīsā in the Sahāsrām edict (whether derived from mīsa or mṛiṣa) is explained as an adverbial accusative ("falsely"). Bühl's and Senarat's proposal also has the advantage of being the only translation which is contextually relevant; i.e., Añokā is telling his subjects not to be attached to men or gods that encourage sacrifice or unclean cultic practices and enjoins them to the purity of the Dharma.

We have now examined four semantic possibilities for this short amīsa ... mīsa phrase:

1) gods formerly did not mix with men, now they do (a good thing caused by Añokā's diligence).
2) formerly gods did not entrance and possess men, now they do (a bad thing to be avoided).
3) formerly kings did not mix with their subjects, now they do. This leveling suggests that all social levels can work towards and achieve the same goal.
4) formerly gods and/or men were considered pure and/or objects of enjoyment/pleasing objects, but now they are recognized as fraudulent, due to Añokā's diligence.

Although all versions can work linguistically and grammatically, it is only the second and fourth which also are contextually relevant. Añokā is not rejecting the gods --- he is after all devamūrya, "beloved of the gods" and repeatedly enjoins all sects to be treated equally. But he is adamantly against sacrifice and assemblies where sacrifice takes place (RE 1 D), "balaḥakam hi dosam samājānītas paśvati, "in these gatherings he sees great harm" (Gimnār; it appears to be this injunction which Añokā is re-emphasizing in MRE 1 in locales where in fact people did gather for the performance of sacrificial rites and other cultic purposes.

Although in Pāli the reflex for Skt. mṛiṣa is mūṣi, Skt. dūmi is retained as dūmi in Pāli and in BH as sāmanskritized as dūma. This word has a wide semantic field with an original meaning of "raw meat" and "food" or "fruit" and often opposed to dhāma in the sense of "physical" or "material gifts." It also has the sense of "gain," "reward," "money," "enjoyment" and "grief," "desire," and "lust." As we have seen above amīsa (with a short -a-) is both an alternative spelling for amīsa and a word in its own right, with part of the semantic feel of amīsa ("an object of worldly enjoyment, luxury; "wealth" and part of a-mīsa ("honesty;" absence of fraud or deceit"). Since long vowels were seldom marked

in the early Prakrits and Añokā inscriptions (Bloch 1950, §7; Brough 1962, §20; Norman 2006, 73), one may assume that all these meanings were present in the original Añokā Prakriti. — i.e., at one time the gods were free from deceit, an object of enjoyment and desire and also a source of material gifts (wealth, prosperity, food) through sacrifice; now, however, with the advent of the new Buddhist dispensation, they have been shown to be false.

There is a passage in the Vīnaya which shows which the confusion between the Prakritī mīsa meaning "honest" or "pure" and a-mīsa meaning "unmixed" was longstanding:

Evam samām vimukticittassā bhante, bhikkhuhi bhutā cēpi cakkhuvidyāyā rāpā cakkhusa āpīṭham āgacchhami, nevissa cittam pariyuddhiyanti. amissīsāsānaṃsa cittam hitāṁ, bhante, anīpapattani, vijñāṇavācaṇapassati.

Thus, Lord, even if shapes cognizable by the eye come very strongly into the field of vision of a monk whose mind is wholly freed, they do not obsess his mind for his mind comes to be undefiled, firm, won to composure and he notes its passing hence" (Horner 2007, vol. 4, 243-44).

The translator renders amīsa/sīkataṃ as "undefiled" and in a footnote cites Buddhaghosha's commentary that this means "unmixed with (or, undefiled by) the kilesas (obstructions)." Clearly Buddhaghosha did not understand the derivation of amīsa/sīkataṃ either, as, per our discussion above, it simply means "pure" and amīsa/sīkataṃ (the final -a changing to -ā with bhi and kā verbs) means he whose mind is freed (vimukticittassā), his mind is thereby purified — a much simpler and clear explanation, with no need to introduce extraneous words like klesa or āṭṭamana.

8 Mahāgutta 1. p. 184. Repeated also in the AN 3, p. 378f; AN 4, p. 404f.
9 Double consonants were seldom marked in early Pāli script (Norman 1989, 382; 2006, 109) and the doublings are often an artefact of a later editor. For example, amīsa and mīsa were written with single -a- in the original Pāli script (see Hullschiw 1925-1926), but doubled by Bloch (1950), as he assumed that the word derived from Skt. mīsa. However, if derived from mṛiṣa, it would not be doubled, as the Prakrit forms show.
10 Amīsāta sat amiskavāsitaṃ, kālātā āṭṭamanaṃ sattānāṃ cittam mīsānām karitaṃ, meaning stabilic amīsāta, amīsāta means unmixed. They make the mind mixed with the sense-objects and the affections, the absence of which is "made unmixed." In Buddhaghosha commentaries to the Sutta Sātiya (AN 3, 378f; MP 3, 392) kālēś appears as the subject of āṭṭamā, which makes better sense.


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Conclusion

This philological exercise solves a 2300 year old mystery as to what the gods were doing “mixed with men” at these ancient cultic, sacrificial sites. Falk’s study has provided the key to understand Aśoka’s meaning. The old style communion with the gods in these folk festivals is no longer appropriate; the false gods have been deposed and replaced with the saṃdhūnamba.

Abbreviations

AN Ahmedabad Natya
MP Manonvraphānpī
MRE Minor Rock Edict
MW Monier Williams Sanskrit English Dictionary
NIA New Indo-Aryan
P Pāli
RE Rock Edicts (capital letter following refers to Hultsch’s section designations, 1969)

Appendix One: MRE Section on amisā/misā

(Sircar 1979 134; Andersen 1990, 114)12

1) Abhaurī (south of Varanasi): etena amistabha[na]... [manistabha] mīsāṁ devā kaṭi (P) sālokamā samā phala[P] (P)

2) Bahāpur (Delhi): etena amisthasaṃkha-dāpāsi ye amistha devā samāṃ mānasaṁ devizā (P) sālokamā hri[sa] esa [phale][P] (P)

3) Bairīt (north of Jaipur)... amisthasaṃkha naḥya devizā... mi... (P) samāma esa... le (P)

4) Brahmagiri (Karnataka): imistha ca kālāna amistha samāṃ mānistaṃkha-dāpaṭa mīsā devizā (P) sālokamā hi ṣaṃ phale[P] (P)

5) Errangu (Anantapur, south India): imistha ca kālāna amistha ye mānista devizā te sāṁ phalabha[P] sālokamā esa phale[P] (P)

6) Gavimath (Karnataka): se imisthasaṃkha-dāpaṭa amistha devā samāṃ mānasaḥ se sāṁ phalabha[P] sālokamā esa phale[P] (P)

7) Gujārā (Madhya Pradesh, north India): etena amisthasaṃkha-dāpaṭa Desanapāpāsa amisthitvā devā samā phala mānistaṃ-mīsā-devā kaṭa (P) sālokamā ṣaṃ phale[P] (P)

Appendix Two: Translation of selected MRE Section E

(Where data is sufficient)

1) Bahāpur (Delhi): At that time in India, those men who were pure along with their gods are now (considered) fraudulent along with their gods. This is the fruit of diligence.13

2) Bramagiri (Karnataka): At that time, men were pure in India, (now) they appear falsely with their gods. This is the result of effort.

3) Errangu (Anantapur, south India): At that time men with their gods were pure and now they have been deposed. This is the fruit of diligence.

4) Gavimath (Karnataka): At that time in India, gods were the object of enjoyment/attraction to their followers and now they have been recognized as false. This is the fruit of effort.14

12 Square brackets indicate reconstructions of Sircar’s part as do asterisks.

13 Taking samāta in the sense of “now being”.

14 This is taking mānistaḥ as an abstractive of source or an instrumental of agent, viz., “... (considered) an object of enjoyment by their followers ...”
5) Gujarrā (Madhya Pradesh, north India): At that time in India the subjects of Devānāmpriya whose gods were (considered) pure, have (now) been recognized as false. This is the fruit of effort.

6) Rūpnath (Madhya Pradesh): At that time in India, those gods were pure; now they have been made false. This is fruit of diligence.

7) Sahāram (Bihar): At that time in India, gods were pure (and) men; the gods were made false — that is the fruit of effort.

References


