Nepalese Manuscripts of the Suśrutasaṃhitā

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Introduction  The Suśrutasaṃhitā is, as well-known, one of the two, or the three, most important classics on Indian medicine. There are three palm-leaf manuscripts of it preserved in Nepal. The aim of this article is to draw attention to their significance by offering some preliminary observations. The three manuscripts are: 1) (a) Kesar Library, Kathmandu, accession no. 699, filmed as C 80/7 by the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP); (b) National Archives, Kathmandu (NAK), accession no. 5 (pa)-333, filmed as NGMPP B 29/19; 2) (c) NAK accession no. 1-1079 (filmed as NGMPP A 45/5 and A 1267/11).

Of these only (b) is more or less complete. Manuscript (a) consists of folios of at least two originally distinct manuscripts. Overall, it covers about two-thirds of the entire text. Despite folios coming from different origins, there are little, if any, overlaps. Manuscripts (a) and (b) each have a colophon mentioning a date. The date in (a) is verified as Sunday, 13 April 878 CE. 3) This makes the manuscript the oldest verifiably dated manuscript in Nepal and possibly of all the Indic manuscripts. In 2013 the manuscript was designated a UNESCO Memory of the World.

The date recorded in (b) is uncertain due to an unclear correction made to the year part. According to my reading of the date, it falls in 1540. The manuscript used to form part of the manuscript collection of Hemraj Sharma, the royal pandit of Nepal. The manuscript has been mentioned in some of his publications. He understood the date to be in 1510.

Manuscript (c) is incomplete, consisting of 98 folios. Paleographically, it is younger than (a) but older than (b).

Buddhists and the Suśrutasaṃhitā?  One feature that immediately attracts attention is that the scribes of manuscripts (a) and (c) were probably Buddhists. Manuscript (a) begins with "[SIDDHAM] 4) om namah kamalahastāya," and the Nighaṇṭu part of the same manuscript starts with "om namah sarvajñāyānuttaravaidyārājāya." Manuscript (c),
on the other hand, starts with "namah sarvabuddhabodhisatvebhyah || namo nagarjunapada darya." This might hint the role that Buddhists played in transmitting medical texts.5)

The text found in the Nepalese manuscripts itself might indicate Buddhist involvement in its composition (and later obfuscation of such traits). One instance is the expression alpayuska. This occurs in the sentence "alpayuska alpamedhastvam ca lokyanarana bhuyo stadh pranitavan." The editions I could consult6) all read "alpayusvam alpamedhastvam ca ..." Between these two readings, the latter is likely to be secondary; motivations for change from the former to the latter is conceivable but not in the other direction. One of the conceivable motivations is the perceived awkwardness of the expression alpayuska. Such an expression hardly occurs outside Buddhist literature. On the other hand, it is a fairly common expression in Buddhist Sanskrit literature. Also noteworthy is the function of the word ca in the two versions. In the reading in the Nepalese manuscripts, it functions as a sentence connector while in the editions it binds two words ending with -tvam. The word ca functioning as a sentence connector is desirable in the context where the sequence of events where Brahma created the Ayurveda is taught. The text in the editions reads clumsy. I consider this clumsiness to be an artifact of the text being changed.

Another example indicating Buddhist involvement in composing (at least in some parts of) the SuSrutasamhitā found in the Nepalese manuscripts is the expression sarvasarīra. Toward the beginning of the text a sentence explains what kāyacikitsā, the first of the eight branches of the Ayurveda, does. The text recovered from the Nepalese manuscripts reads "kāyacikitsā nāma sarvaśarīravasthitānām vyādhiṇām upaśamakaranārtham jvaraśophagulmarakafortitonmādāpamāraprāmeśaśāradinān ca." All the editions have a sentence that reads "kāyacikitsā nāma sarvaṅgasamansthitānām vyādhiṇām jvara ... ādīnām"7) upaśamanārtham." I doubt either of the readings to be authentic but consider them to be two results of trying to "fix" a perceived problem. The reading that produced these readings was probably something like kāyacikitsā nāma sarvaśarīravasthitānām vyādhiṇām jvara ... ādīnām upaśamanārtham," much closer to what the editions have. The problem was that the word sarvaśarīra generally means the body of everybody and the word is usually used in the plural. The intended meaning in our text was, considering the context, "pertaining to the whole body." To those who are familiar with the first meaning of the word sarvaśarīra, the sentence may seem awkward. One solution was to make the diseases found in everybody’s body and examples of diseases pertaining to the whole body two different things, by mov-
ing the word *upaśamanārtham* and adding *ca* at the end of the long *dvandva* compound. This was what was recorded in the Nepalese manuscripts. This was a convoluted solution and not quite successful. On the other hand, someone, probably not in Nepal, simply substituted the word *sarvaśarīra* with *sarvaṅga*, a more common expression to mean pertaining to the whole body. Again, when we search for the expression *sarvaśarīra* we find the word in singular, meaning “the whole body,” predominantly in Buddhist texts while the same word in plural, meaning “all the bodies,” is more common in Brahmanical/Hindu texts.

**Relationship between the Nepalese Manuscripts** When we compare the readings in the manuscripts and editions a clear picture emerges. Generally they form two groups: the Nepalese manuscripts are closer to each other and the editions are closer to each other. However, none of the Nepalese manuscripts directly derive from another. More specifically, (1) the manuscripts (b) and (c) are not direct copies of (a); (2) manuscripts (b) and (c) are more closely related, i.e., they derived from the same source which is not (a); (3) and (b) is not a descendant of (c).

As for item 1, we can assert it because in some places (b) and (c) have readings that point to the existence of a common ancestor other than (a). For example, the reading “*suśruto bhagavantam pratyakṣasyopadiśyamānaṁ*” is found in (b) and (c) instead of the correct “*suśruto bhagavantam prakṣyaty asyopadiśyamānaṁ*” of (a). Such an error is unlikely to occur independently; the reading is most likely inherited from the same source.

Yet (b) is not necessarily a descendant of (c) even though it is younger than (c). An example is the reading “*ta ete*” of (a) and (b); (c) reads simply “*ete*.” It is doubtful that the word “*ta (te without sandhi)*” could have been recovered in (b) if it had been a descendant of (c).

What all the above tells us is the existence of intervening manuscripts of the Suśrutasamhitā in Nepal. The extant manuscripts derived from the same source. They could all have derived from (a) itself but at this point, I have no evidence to determine if that was the case. Nonetheless, the Nepalese transmission of the Suśrutasamhitā was more or less unaffected by versions from outside up to the 16th century. Moreover, the version did not go through significant revisions since the 9th century. Pending further comparisons with manuscripts from other areas, we might tentatively call it the Nepalese recension of the Suśruta-samhitā.
Observations of the Nepalese Recension

It is worth emphasizing that the existence of manuscript (a) is a very rare case where a very old dated manuscript of a widely circulated Sanskrit text is preserved. This fact allows us to case-study the development of a popular text by looking at a snapshot of the development at a certain old period. This opportunity offers an advantage over speculating the state of the text in the same period by reconstructing archetypes from younger manuscripts. Also, the recension appears free of contaminations from the development elsewhere.

Here are a few preliminary observations concerning the development of the Suśrutasaṁhitā. First, we find signs of a long period of transmission already in the 9th century. In other words, the text had been much altered (some of them being corruptions) since the time of the hypothetical original composition. An example is the very first sentence of the text. The 9th century manuscript (a) and a little younger manuscript (b) read “āthāto vedopattim ādhyāyam vyākhyāsyāmah.” Manuscript (a) has a correction so that it reads “vedopattim adhyāyam.” This reading is shared with the Bombay edition. On the other hand, the youngest Nepalese manuscript (c) reads “vedopattim nāmādhyāyam” along with the Calcutta edition. The readings in the older Nepalese manuscripts (a) and (c) might suggest the reading vedopattināmādhyāyam as the archetypal reading, the syllable nā being dropped. Indeed this is the reading in the Jaipur edition. It is possible that the reading in (c) and the Calcutta edition, too, derived from that reading by adding an anusvāra to make vedopatti a complete word. I consider these readings to be secondary and the reading of (a) after correction and the Bombay edition to be authentic. It is understandable that for some the feminine utpattim and the masculine adhyāyam sharing the same syntactic position felt uncomfortable, but either of the readings with nāma does not make the sentence any better. I think this opening statement should be stylistically similar to the rest of the text, and the oldest manuscript (a) does not have nāma already in the beginning of the next adhyāya. The various readings found in the manuscripts and editions may indicate various attempts to fix the clumsiness felt very early on in the transmission of the text. In short, even the oldest manuscript (a) exhibits signs of several steps of tampering of the text.

Another interesting, probably very old, corruption is the phrase “śaṣṭhyābhidhānair iti” found at the end of an explanation of what sālya among the eight āṅga is. This phrase is meaningless in the context and appears to come from some grammatical exegesis. This is

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found in all the Nepalese manuscripts at the same place but a similar phrase (saṣṭhyā vi-
dhānaiḥ) is found in the Jaipur edition in a different place and a commentator Dalhana also
knows this phrase somewhere in the text. All these indicate that a contamination from posi-
tively a marginal note happened rather at an early stage of transmission of the text. It not
only had arrived in Nepal in the 9th century but was carried on in other areas.

The above two examples indicate the antiquity of the text. The text had enough time for
various corruptions to enter its transmission by the 9th century.

**Significance of the Nepalese Recension of the Suśrutasaṃhitā**  Will those manu-
scripts help retracing the textual development of the Suśrutasaṃhitā? My initial observa-
tions indicate that significant insight may be obtained from them. The following is again an
example showing what we might get by studying these manuscripts in terms of reconstruct-
ing the change of the Suśruta.

In many places we find significant divergences of text between the Nepalese manuscripts
and editions. One such example is a Veda reference telling the origin of śalya. The read-
ings in the Nepalese manuscripts derived from “yathā purā rudrena śiras chinnam aśvi-
bhyāṃ punah samādhitam.” On the other hand, the editions read “yathā yajñasya śiras chi-
nnam iti tato devā aśvināv abhigamyocuh, bhagantaushah śreṣṭhatamau yuvām bhaviṣyathah,
bhavadbhyām yajñasya śiraḥ sandhātavyam iti| tāv uccatur evam astv iti| atha tayor artre
devā indram yajñabhāgena prāśādayan| tābhyaṃ yajñasya śiraḥ sanhitam.”

Apparently this version is significantly longer. Either version does not appear to be a literal quote but
appears to be a retelling of a familiar story. As for the language, the longer version is
clumsy, especially where the parallel part ends (chinnam iti). In the longer version, the
words yathā and iti after chinnam are not serving much purpose. The reading in the Nepalese
manuscripts is, although brief, coherent. I consider this is an example where the Nepalese
manuscripts help us recover much older text.

**Conclusion**  I have only examined a very limited portion of the Suśrutasaṃhitā. Even in
that portion there are many more interesting points that I could not discuss in this article.
Further findings may be discussed elsewhere. Nonetheless, it seems clear that systematic
examinations of the text of the Nepalese recension of the Suśrutasaṃhitā will yield signi-
ficant information in reconstructing the textual history of it. Even more desirable is to exam-
ine manuscripts from other areas. Comparison with only three printed editions already can
tell so much about the text. I do not doubt that collating more manuscript material will
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give us significantly deeper insight into the history of the Suśrutasaṁhitā.


2) Based on microfilm images in NGMPP B 30-15, I once thought B 30-15 was a partial retake of the same manuscript as B 29-19. However, it also has a distinct NAK accession number 5-334. If it was a retake, the microfilm should have the same accession number 5-333 as B 29-19. A visit to the National Archives, Kathmandu, in September 2013 revealed that indeed NAK 5-334 is a distinct manuscript but consists of modern printouts of photographs of 5-333 cut and bound in the form of manuscript, complete with a wrapping cloth.


4) I have transliterated the symbol, often called the Siddham symbol that is found very often at the beginning of a manuscript as [SIDDHAM].

5) The involvement of a Nāgārjuna in shaping the Suśruta in the current form has been variously discussed. See G. Jan Meulenbeld, A History of Indian Medical Literature, volume IA, Text (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1999), pp. 338–341, 350. Naturally the name Nāgārjuna invokes the notion of Buddhist connexion.

6) The Sushrutasamhita of Sushruta, with the Nibandhasangraha Commentary of Shri Dahanāchārya, edited by Jādavijī Trikumji Āchārya (Bombay: Nirmaya-sagar Press, 1915) (Meulenbeled’s v); Suśrataḥ, Sūtānīdānāśāriracitkiṣākāloppataramkṣaṇaḥ āyurvedāḥ bhagavatā Dhanvantarinaopadiṣṭaḥ, Suśrutanāmadheyaṇa tacchisyeṇa viracitaḥ, vi, e, Upādhi dhārīṇā Śrijivāṇandavidyāsāgarārthāṭā-cāryyaṇaṃ samāṃṣkṛtya prakāśitaḥ (Calcutta, 1889) (Meulenbeld’s b); and Suśrutasamhita (Sūtra Sṭhān) with Bhāumumati Commentary by Cakrapāṇi Datta, edited by Vaidya Jādavijī Trikamajī Āchārya

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7) I have abbreviated this long dvandva compound in the editions for there are some differences among them. Generally speaking, the differences are: jvaraṣṭhapagulma of the Nepalese manuscripts becomes simply jvara, pitto pittaśoso, and atisāra atisāra in editions.

8) The sentence in fact ends with at prakṣyati, so, in a modern edition it may be typeset as “prakṣyati asyo...”

9) The concept of “the original composition” is a philosophical question. What is it? There have been multiple theories regarding the layers of the Suśrutasamhitā. See Meulenbeld (1999), pp. 336–352. It may be a priori accepted that the text of the Suśrutasamhitā has gone through various degrees of modifications till it reached our eyes in the form of manuscripts. It is not even possible to speak of “the current Suśrutasamhitā” because, again, a priori, manuscripts from the different time periods from different areas have been preserved and none of them transmits exactly the same text. There probably was no “original definite version” of the Suśrutasamhitā at any point in time. However, we can still surmise more original state of the text in many instances by various methods from extant manuscripts. Some of such instances will be mentioned below.

10) An article by Moriguchi Mai in the same volume of this journal discusses a replacement of a whole chapter.


12) See also Harimoto (2012).

13) Although I did not distinguish editions, there are differences among them. Particularly interesting are the readings in the Jaipur edition. Its readings often agree with those in the Nepalese manuscripts. In addition often readings found in the Nepalese manuscripts are mentioned by commentators.

(Key words) Āyurveda, Manuscript, Nepal

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