

## Report on AISLS Preconference on Meghaduta and Messenger Poems in South Asia, Madison, October 20, 2011.

The Meghaduta and sandesa preconference sponsored by AISLS and held at the annual South Asia conference on October 20, 2011 had 10 attendees: Yigal Bronner (University of Chicago), Stewart Gordon (University of Michigan); Sivan Goren (Hebrew University), Charles Hallisey (Harvard University), V. Narayana Rao (Emory University), Katarzyna Pazucha (University of Chicago), Gautam Reddy (University of Chicago), David Shulman (Hebrew University), Gary Tubb (University of Chicago), Katherine Young (Corcordia University); Deven Patel (University of Pennsylvania) sent material for discussion, but was unable to attend, and Rich Freeman who participated in planning was also unable to attend.

This preconference on sandesa poetry was preliminary and exploratory by design. It was not organized around the presentation of a series of prepared seminar papers, but instead was a collective exploration on how we can learn to read sandesa kavya better in a way that can enhance our understanding and appreciation of sandesa poetry as a literary phenomenon in South Asia. Senarat Paranavitana spoke about the corpus of Sinhala poetry that exists at Sigiriya in Sri Lanka in terms that apply equally to the tasks that were taken up collectively in learning how to read sandesa poetry better:

These verses were composed on a particular occasion, in circumstances of a peculiar nature, and were addressed to an audience who were in a certain frame of mind. What was considered effective and striking in such circumstances will cease to be so under different conditions. Certain allusions, and the particular associations evoked by certain words, on which the effectiveness of a verse depended, would have been obvious to those to whom the verses were originally addressed. (Senarat Paranavitana, Sigiri Graffiti, 'Introduction,' clxxxix)

Obviously, we read particular examples of sandesa poetry under very different conditions than those in which they were written and read in South Asia in the past. In the preconference we asked whether we can create ways for ourselves to be able to discern, even if only dimly, how sandesa poems might have been considered effective and striking, especially when sandesa poetry is a kind of "repetitive genre" in which a highly-conventionalized form is very much to the fore, at least in terms of the framework of content. We also asked whether it possible that engaging the trans-linguistic character of sandesa poetry, written as it was in a variety of translocal and local languages, can suggest different ways to enable ourselves to discern how particular examples of sandesa poetry were considered effective and striking?

Some of the questions taken up during the day were:

Issues of form, especially meter, rhyme, rhythm or melody as well as sabdalankaras of various sorts. Can we see how, for example, the choice of meter or meters in a sandesa poem was a kind of catalyst, giving the alert reader or connoisseur certain expectations about the tone or content of a poem? Can we discern the significance of the use of a particular poetic form, and answer what that poetic form brings to a poem apart from the display of a poet's craft and ability?

Issues of genre: what sort of genre is sandesa poetry, what are its conventions that allow an audience to know what to expect from any particular instance of the genre? Is creating a history of the genre important for better readings of individual sandesa poems? Is sandesa poetry always defined as a genre in the same way? does the genre create problems for larger frameworks of understanding poetry?

Issues of textual connections and intertextuality: it seems that there must be some sort of connectivity between sandesa poetry found in different languages, in different regions, and in different periods, but what is the significance of this connectivity for better readings of individual sandesa poems; does knowing this connected history help us to read the poems better or does it primarily shed light of large-scale, if dimly perceived processes of literary cultures in South Asia. How do we imagine a trans-linguistic literary phenomenon in South Asia, like sandesas. Are sandesa poems the product of something like the social and cultural processes of a Sanskrit cosmopolis and the processes of vernacularization, or is it something else. How significant is the imagination of this trans-linguistic to our reading of a poem? To what degree do sandesas connect to and allude to the genre of mahakavya in Sanskrit and its derivatives in vernacular languages as well as to other genres in particular literary traditions in different languages?

Issues of reception history: How has the Meghaduta been received and how is this reception history relevant to our learning how to read sandesa poetry better? Are there commentaries for the Meghaduta in various regional languages? If there are such commentaries, how do they connect to commentaries on sandesa poetry in regional languages? How else might the reception history of Meghaduta be construed, besides commentary: by translations—if they exist. Should the creation of sandesa poetry in southern South Asia during the middle period be centrally visible in us learning how to read the Meghaduta with

an eye to discerning how it was both striking and effective for audiences across time and space, or is the production of sandesas in Sanskrit, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and Sinhala in the middle period largely separate from what we would want in a reception history of the Meghaduta itself. Does the presence of an area in southern South Asia where sandesa poetry was particularly visible in the middle period offer boundaries. Is it possible to suggest that sandesas in regional languages drew on each other rather than only on the model of the Meghaduta itself?

Two horizons emerged in this preliminary workshop, which suggested how further explorations of sandesa poetry as a complex literary phenomenon in South Asia might be pursued. First horizon: there is a challenge to seeing how the sandesa poetry is not just a corpus of tedious examples of a monotonous “repetitive genre,” and we have to find different ways of engaging individual examples as striking and effective pieces of literature. Second horizon: how does the big picture of South Asian literary cultures look like after better appreciation of sandesa poetry? A third task that emerged is to imagine ways of connecting the interpretive practices associated with these two horizons, that is trying to move from an engagement with and appreciation of individual texts, or even an engagement with and an appreciation of parts of individual texts, to questions about larger processes of literary cultures and literary networks that connect literary cultures?

The schedule for the preconference was as follows:

9:30: Introductory session: brief overviews of sandesa poetry in the areas represented by presenters. This ranged from the place of Meghaduta in Sanskrit literary criticism (Gary Tubb) to brief introductions of sandesa poetry in different languages (Sanskrit; Tamil, Telugu, Sinhala, Malayalam.)

10:45-11: Break for Coffee

11:00-12:30: Gary Tubb introduced how Meghaduta was a ‘problem’ for Sanskrit literary critics.

12:30-1:30: Lunch.

1:30: The afternoon sessions were half-hour presentations on particular instances of Sandesa poetry in different languages.

1:30-2:10: Tamil: David Shulman

2:10-2:50: Sanskrit from Kerala: Sivan Goren

2:50-3:30: Sanskrit from the Telugu region: Yigal Bronner

3:30-3:45: Break for Tea

3:45-4:25: Telugu: V. Narayana Rao.

4:25-5:05: Sinhala: Charles Hallisey

5:05-5:30: Closing discussion: what are the biggest obstacles to reading sandesa poetry as a corpus? Is it worthwhile thinking of sandesa as a single, albeit complex, literary phenomenon?

There was then a dinner Thursday evening for the preconference participants.