

Harald Wiese, Leipzig

Review of

MARK McCLISH (2019): *The History of the Arthaśāstra*,  
Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-1-108-  
47690-4

Ever since his graduate student days, MARK McCLISH has been on a hunt for the “original” *Arthaśāstra*. It seems that he has killed the beast, his book being the trophy. As with any *vidyādāna*, we all can share in joining the meal.

Methodologically, McCLISH unfolds his arguments in two parts. Since “it would be a mistake to allow assumptions about the ideological content of the *Arthaśāstra* to influence my [McCLISH’s own, HW] theory of the text’s composition”, the author develops the more formal arguments in chapters two through six and turns to the “ideological contents” in chapters seven through nine. It is difficult to say whether McCLISH succeeded wholesale in preventing any influence of the second part on the first one. But the methodological decision is surely laudable and the formal clues analyzed by the author, such as

- the “redundant segmentation” (in chapters and topics),
- colophons and verses,
- citations (that attribute “random positions to teachers and schools”, p. 104)

attest to valiant efforts in this direction.

The traditional account of the *Arthaśāstra* is this: It has been written by some Brahmin Cāṅakya who had helped Candragupta Maurya to overthrow the Nandas and to take the throne towards the end of the fourth century B.C.. Cāṅakya also calls himself Kauṭilya. Unsurprisingly, McCLISH is clear on his refutation of this Kauṭilya-Cāṅakya identity.

The book is an ambitious project in applying higher criticism. As the author explains very carefully, **lower criticism** is the work of collating extant manuscript copies and of collecting testimonia. The result of that work is the critical edition that reconstructs the **archetype**. The *Arthaśāstra*'s archetype has been put together by KANGLE (1969). McCLISH claims that the *Arthaśāstra*'s "original" text, the **autograph**, is not accessible by lower criticism alone. Instead, by a process called **higher criticism**, a philologist might try to make intelligent guesses about the manuscript's earlier states. Then, finally, the so-called "*autograph*, the original publication of the author" (p. 24) might come to light, more or less, of course.

McCLISH claims that the *Arthaśāstra* came into being by "an early redaction" of an autograph. In particular, the author defends these claims:

- The autograph was probably called *Daṇḍanīti*.
  - Its author is unknown.
  - It seems to have been compiled from various sources.
  - The *Daṇḍanīti* itself may have been composed in the first century BCE or a little earlier.
- The *Daṇḍanīti* was not subject to major changes until the redaction. Perhaps, the table of contents was added in the meantime.

- In the third or fourth century CE, a redactor who calls himself Kauṭilya<sup>1</sup> added
  - chapter colophons,
  - the citations attributed to him or other teachers,
  - the *Arthaśāstra*'s structure in terms of books and chapters, according to the usual manner of citing book 6, chapter 1, *sūtra* 1 by KAŚ 6.1.1, and
  - various additions throughout the received text (KAŚ 1.1, books 8, books 11-15 exempting book 13, among others), in particular with respect to Brahmanical concerns.
- The identification of Cāṇakya with the *Arthaśāstra*'s composer (KAŚ 15.1.73) is not due to the redactor Kauṭilya, but was added later on.

With respect to the book's first part<sup>2</sup>, one cannot help but be very impressed by McCLISH's deep penetration of the text. Of course, his chosen method, higher criticism, is very ambitious indeed. It tries to pursue a diachronic analysis (what did the autograph look like) with only a synchronic item (the archetype) present. Imagine trying to arrive at the Indo-European language with just the English language providing the data. That might not be totally impossible. After all, the differences between Germanic words (like *five*) and foreign words of Roman, Greek, or Sanskrit origin (such as *quintet*, *pentagon*, and *punch*, respectively) might

---

<sup>1</sup> McCLISH (pp. 22-23, 109) can point to the interesting parallel of the *Caraka Saṃhita* which is named by the redactor, not the original composer (Agniveśa).

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 6 is a summary of the first part.

have lead the way. Of course, this is not how Indo-European was reconstructed and this method would not have yielded satisfactory results. The point of this example is (i) to indicate what McCLISH was up against and (ii) to issue a cautionary warning with respect to the many necessarily speculative claims. In particular, McCLISH consistently speaks of a single redactor. As he knows himself, his arguments in this respect are not very commanding, such as parsimony (p. 139) or the impossibility “at present to detect any changes to the *Daṇḍanīti* between its composition and redaction” (p. 142). While history does not owe us any parsimony, it is also true that McCLISH’s account would not need to be changed dramatically if there had been several redactors rather than just one.

The purpose of McCLISH’s effort is not, as he wisely says, to distinguish between “authentic” or “inauthentic” parts of the *Arthaśāstra*. “Quite the opposite, in fact. It is critical to see the text as the product of successive contributions that illustrate the dynamism of the Indic statecraft tradition over time. The redactor was as much an expert as the original composer [...]” (p. 153) In this vein, the second part of the book develops the first part’s implications for the ideology of statecraft. McCLISH’s convincing theses are these: The *Daṇḍanīti* treats the king’s business in purely power terms even if the king takes the Brahmanical realities into account. The portions added by Kauṭilya turn out to be those that stress Brahmanical values such as *varṇadharmā* while the political philosophy of the redactor remains difficult to understand.

When sketching the *Daṇḍanīti*’s philosophy of state, McCLISH is probably right that the king cared for his subjects’ wellbeing for the (more or less exclusive) reason that disgruntled subjects would be detrimental to his

hold onto power or to his imperialist ambitions. A further indication of this is the contract theory of state of KAŚ 1.13.5-7 where the king is depicted as collecting tax in exchange for providing security.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, there is no evidence that Kauṭilya himself (or indeed the *Daṇḍanīti* author) agreed to his point of view. Instead, the above passage is ideological. Its purpose is to propitiate the people with their tax-collecting ruler who may seem oppressive.<sup>4</sup>

The last chapter is of special interest. Here, the author links the *Daṇḍanīti* uncovered by himself to the Upaniṣadic literature, the *Jātakas*, or the Jain *Nandisūtra* (p. 211). In contrast, *rājadharma* or *arthaśāstra* stand for the “statecraft tradition within more comprehensive value systems” connected to the *Mīmāṃsā* definition of dharmic rules being *adr̥ṣṭārtha* (“without a seen purpose”): “By embedding the seen within the unseen, *dharmaśāstra* both subsumes *daṇḍanīti* and neutralizes its discordant ideology.” (p. 212). Both the inclusion of the *daṇḍanīti* in the *Mānava dharmasāstra* and its redaction speak of the “convergence between statecraft and dharma” (p. 215). This process was part of the Brahmanical revival of which McCLISH offers an insightful, but surely inconclusive discussion (pp. 217). I find refreshing and suitably modest the question that ends McCLISH’s last chapter: why did “the theology of orthodox Brāhmaṇism [come] over time to leave its imprint upon a tradition originally independent of it”?

---

<sup>3</sup> Compare p. 178, fn. 10.

<sup>4</sup> WIESE (2016) argues for a similarly power-centred interpretation of KAŚ 4.13.42-43 (the Varuṇa rule). McCLISH assigns the whole chapter 4.13 to the redaction.

In summary, MARK McCLISH has written a very clearly structured book (accompanied by ten helpful appendices) that is exceedingly carefully written and researched,<sup>5</sup> provides a wealth of interpretation and food for thought for the *Arthaśāstra* and *Dāṇḍanīti* (!) enthusiasts who seem to be growing in numbers. McCLISH is to be felicitated on an important book on an eminent treatise.

## *Publication bibliography*

- BRICK, DAVID (2015): *Brahmanical Theories of the Gift*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- KANGLE, R. P. (1969): *The Kautiliya Arthaśāstra. Part I: Sanskrit Text with a Glossary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bombay: Bombay University.
- NATH, VIJAY (1987): *Dana: gift system in ancient India. (c. 600 BC. - c. AD. 300); a socio-economic perspective*. Delhi usw.: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- OLIVELLE, PATRICK (2013): *King, governance, and law in ancient India. Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra*. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press.
- WIESE, HARALD (2016): Indian principal-agent theory, or, how Varuṇa helps the king to be just. In: *Asiatische Studien – Études Asiatiques* 70, pp. 571–589.
- WIESE, HARALD (2017): Kauṭilya on legal and illegal cancellations of contracts. In: *Indo-Iranian Journal* 60, pp. 201–218.

---

<sup>5</sup> Four minor critical points: (i) In a new edition, the author might have second thoughts on his use of the word “euphemism” (pp. 1, 116), which may reflect Western sensibilities more than Indic ones. (ii) On p. 119, “chapter 14” should be replaced by “book 14”. (iii) It is not true that Brahmins “depended utterly” on “kings and ruling nobles” for their material wellbeing (p. 176). Judging from the *dānadharmā* literature, people from the remaining *dvija* class and even *sūdras* might donate (see BRICK (2015, p. 51)). See also NATH (1987, chapter 3). (iv) The reviewer would have liked to learn whether KAŚ 3.15.2-4, 7 (see WIESE (2017)) or KAŚ 12.2.4 (see OLIVELLE (2013, p. 687)) might be considered interpolations. See p. 200.