

## PERIODIZATION OF PRE-MODERN HISTORICAL PROCESSES IN INDIA AND EUROPE : SOME REFLECTIONS\*

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For a better understanding of the nexus of Indian and European history, and consequently also for a joint periodization of the historical processes in the Eurasian continent, I begin by putting forward a few hypotheses which may clarify and underline my following arguments :

- 1) The linking of Indian history with that of other regions of the Eurasian continent need not arise from a Eurocentric idea of history, but results from a multiplicity of interrelated, though largely autonomous, processes in the Eurasian context.
- 2) These interlinked and comparable historical processes in different regions of the Eurasian continent are related to:
  - a) a common beginning of their respective histories. They had their origin in the protracted process of the so-called "neolithic revolution", which began in the eighth to sixth millennia B.C with planned agriculture and the emergence of advanced forms of social and, later on, political organization. In the late fourth and early third millennia B.C. this process led to the formation of the three earliest advanced "urban" cultures in Mesopotamia, the Nile valley and the Indus valley and, about a millennium later, in China in the Hoangho valley;
  - b) a series of historical movements and migrations of peoples to which these advanced cultures were repeatedly exposed "from outside" at longer intervals during the following millennia. As will be shown, most of them originated from Central Asia. These movements acted as impulses which deeply influenced the historical processes in the respective Eurasian regions.
- 3) The similarities of the beginnings of historical processes and repeated "impacts" or impulses mainly from Central Asia led in Europe, Near East and India to a surprisingly strong congruence of further historical processes.
- 4) Apart from these similar or even identical impulses from outside, there also existed direct contacts between the Near East, Central Asia, India and Europe from the early historical period. These contacts, mostly in the form of trade and religious movements in pre-modern period, further strengthened interrelated regional processes, for example, urbanization during the classical period or the emergence of monastic institutions in large parts of Asia with all their socio-cultural implications.

In the following pages I intend to furnish a (certainly incomplete) list of these impulses and their possible effects on the historical processes in Europe and India.

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## I

The increasing settledness of semi-nomadic groups in the extensive riverine landscapes between Egypt and India from the eighth to sixth millennium B.C., the domestication of plants and the beginning of agriculture, the development of translocal trade and increasing social stratification and political organization created the prerequisites for the emergence of the three great early advanced cultures and their intellectual achievements like script and new forms of art and religion. As far as South Asia is concerned, it was presumed till about three decades ago that the Indus civilization of the third to second millennia B.C., with its systematically laid out cities like Mohenjo-daro, Harappa and Kalibangan, had been an offshoot of the Sumerian culture. But recent excavations in Pakistan have shown that the Indus culture emerged from an autochthonous process from the eighth and seventh millennia B.C. in Baluchistan on the western margin of the Indus valley. Beginning in the fourth and culminating in the third and early second millennia B.C., these three advanced cultures developed, for the first time in human history, something like a world civilization mainly by means of intensive trade contacts. China also found entry into this world civilization at the end of this period, even though it continued to remain rather isolated for about two more millennia.

Since the early second millennium B.C. these early advanced cultures went through a period of internal crises which were aggravated by the first historically known great migration of peoples. Like so many of their successors it was initiated mainly by the nomads of the steppes of Central Asia lying at the frontiers of the early advanced cultures. By virtue of their greater mobility and the latest weapon, the horse-drawn war chariot, these nomads appear to have been militarily superior to the settled peasant societies and city-states of the "fertile crescent" and the Indus valley.

Half-nomadic pastoral tribes from the south-west of Central Asia, which have been identified with the so-called Aryans or Indo-Europeans, appear to have been of particular importance for the future early advanced cultures. Even though recent research challenges the traditional concepts of these early migrations, it is still likely that the Indo-Europeans entered early Eurasian history in two major movements at the beginning and at the end of the second millennium B.C. Their first appearance in Europe has usually been associated with the early Greeks who appeared in Greece soon after 2000 B.C. Slightly later and the best known in the Near East were the Hittites. Quite possibly in India, too, a group, perhaps associated with the later Vedic Aryans, began to settle down in present-day north-west Pakistan in the early second millennium B.C. The relationship of these early migrating peoples with the early advanced cultures was of a multi-faceted nature. As small warrior classes some of them appear to have taken over the rule of native peasant communities in the Near East before being absorbed by them. In case Central Asian peoples had also already penetrated into north-western India at this early time, they seem to have played only an insignificant role at the periphery of the Indus culture. At the frontiers of and in close contact with the Cretan-Minoan culture, however, they became the representatives of the important Mycenaean culture of the Greek mainland.

The second migration of these peoples towards the end of the second millennium B.C. may even have been more momentous for the further development of Europe, Near East and India. In Greece these were mainly the Dorians, in the Near East the Iranians and in India the Vedic Aryans. While their earlier nomadic-martial predecessors, similar to the feared "peoples of the sea" in the Near East and Egypt, were in some cases associated with the crisis of early advanced

cultures, or have even been looked upon as the likely destroyers of the Minoan culture of Crete, the new groups of cattle-breeding nomads became settled at the end of the second millennium B.C. in peripheral areas of the early advanced cultures: in Greece, the Iranian plateau and north-western India. No doubt, with the war chariots they were also dreaded warriors, but more important for the future were their highly developed ideas of social order based on clans and tribes and, later on, their knowledge of manufacturing iron. The latter led to an increase of trade and, in course of time, through the iron plough, of agriculture. In the early centuries of the first millennium B.C. they entered from their peripheral areas into fruitful contacts with the centres of early advanced cultures, a process which led to the emergence of the early "classical" cultures in Greece, Persia and India.

The process of early state formation during this period reveals certain structural similarities in Europe and India. Thus the development of the early Greek city-states in the archaic period and the subsequent unification of Attica, also called *synoikismos*, may be compared with contemporary development in northern India. Here, too, in Punjab and the Gangetic plain the step-wise settling down of the tribes (*jana*, related to the Greek *genos*) took place from about 1000 B.C. From the numerous small tribal principalities (*janapadas*) a number of large tribal principalities (*mahājanapadas*) emerged in course of the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C. as a result of fusion, military and economic subjugation and agrarian extension. This process of early state formation in India may to a certain extent be compared with the *synoikismos* of Attica and similar developments in other areas of Greece, especially because the rise of tribal principalities in India, too, was associated in many cases with the process of early urbanization. Indian historians have termed this development as the "second urbanization" after that of the Indus civilization.

This period of early state formation and urbanization accompanied by, and based on, the processes of agrarian extension and the emergence of inter-regional trade and communication culminated in a revolutionary intellectual process which Karl Jaspers termed the "Axial Age" of world history.<sup>1</sup> Almost simultaneously there appeared at about 500 B.C.—as Jaspers sees it—in the fight of logos with myth, a new intellectual elite from whom there emerged the teachings of Confucius and Laotse in China, of the Buddha and Mahāvira in India, of Zarathustra in Iran, of the prophets in Israel and of the pre-Socratics in Greece. Even if it is difficult to interpret this intellectual breakthrough as the result of direct causal nexus, its common Eurasian nature is beyond doubt.

## II

The birth of the first so-called "world empire" of history, when Cyrus founded the Persian Empire in c. 550 B.C., occurred in this period of new intellectual impulses. For Greece and India, it was important that only a few decades later the Greek states in Asia Minor were subjugated by Persia and in about 518 B.C. Gandhāra and Sind in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent became satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire. The results of these conflicts for Greece—the successful warding off of the Persian attacks under Darius and Xerxes on mainland Greece—are as well-known as the founding of the Delian-Attic maritime alliance as the first attempt at the political unification of Greece as a supra-regional federation of states. On the other hand, the

1 K. Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* ("Origin and Destination of History") (Frankfurt, 1957).

significance of the conquest of parts of north-western India by the Persian Empire is less clear so far as the further historical development of India is concerned. However, the temporal sequence of the events is unmistakable here, too. Almost simultaneously with the Persian conquest of parts of north-western India there arose in the central Gangetic plain in the area of Benares and Patna the first trans-regional state of Indian history. The princes of Magadha emerged victorious from the struggle between the *mahājanapadas* which had begun at about the same time as the Persian Empire extended its control into the Indus valley. The early state of Magadha comprised the Ganga valley and the Doab from Bengal to Delhi and parts of central India. It is difficult to imagine that knowledge in the West about the Persian Empire and its advanced central administration unknown to India in that period should not have acted as an impulse for the process of empire formation in India, as is presumed in the case of Greece, too.

### III

Alexander's campaigns and succeeding Hellenism were considerably more multi-faceted and important for the future historical development of Europe and India. Initially India did not take any notice of Alexander's military campaign into Punjab in the years from 327 B.C. to 325 B.C. He remained for India one of the many nameless conquerors of the north-west and his name returned to India only about A.D. 1200 with the Muslim conquerors, when the Sultans of Delhi got themselves celebrated as "Second Alexander". However, the indirect consequences for India were of a different nature. Probably after some battles with the garrisons of Alexander, left behind in the Indus valley, Candragupta Maurya overthrew the Nanda dynasty of Magadha and founded the first empire of India at about 320 B.C., which, under Emperor Aśoka in the following century, united almost the entire Indian subcontinent. The Seleucids, as Alexander's successors in Asia, twice unsuccessfully attempted to advance into India: Seleucos Nicator in the last years of the fourth century B.C. and Antiochos the Great a century later. For Europe's knowledge of distant India it was more important that after his peace treaty with Candragupta in c. 302 B.C., Seleucos sent the Greek Megasthenes as his ambassador to Candragupta's court at Pāṭaliputra. His report on India, the most comprehensive foreign work before those of the Arabian scholars, together with the reports of Alexander's Indian campaign, formed the basis of the knowledge in the West of this distant "land of wonders" (Hegel) till right into the Middle Ages. The Ptolemies, too, took an active part in relations with India. After the decline of the Sabaic kingdom in 115 B.C.—which had controlled the transit trade with India—the Epistrategos of Thebes was appointed the general of the Red Sea, which was now even called the "Indian Sea". A certain Eudoxos of Kysikos, together with a ship-wrecked Indian, undertook in these years the first historically known sea voyage to India and back. During the period of the later Ptolemies Egyptian and East African ships reached India more frequently.

The eastern outpost of Hellenism, the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom which had asserted its independence from the Seleucids in the middle of the third century B.C., was of great significance for the future development of India. In about 185 B.C., when King Demetrios advanced deep into the Ganga valley, the history of Indo-Greek kingdoms in north-west India began. About forty Greek kings are known to have ruled in the following two centuries in Bactria and north-west India. Most renowned among them is King Menander, who even gained entry into Buddhist hagiography under the name Milinda. Towards the end of the second century B.C. Heliodoros, as ambassador of King Antialkidas of Taxila, got erected a still extant pillar in distant Vidisha

in Madhya Pradesh, on which he called himself a devotee of the Hindu god Vāsudeva. The most important heritage of the Graeco-Bactrian culture in India and Asia is the Buddha sculpture which was deeply influenced by the Graeco-Roman sculptures of Apollo. Not less important, economically, was the introduction of a uniform coinage of the Attic system, through which north-west India came to be included in the international economic system of the Hellenic world.

#### IV

After the conquest of Egypt by Augustus in 30 B.C., there was an unforeseen upsurge in Europe's relations with India. With this Rome emerged as the heir to the Ptolemies and inherited their trade with India. Guided by the laws of the monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean, most likely identified in the early first century A.D. by the Greek sea-farer Hippalos, a vigorous Indo-Roman trade developed in the first two centuries A.D. in order to meet the immeasurable demand in Augustan Rome for oriental spices and luxury articles on the one side and India's by no means less important demand for gold on the other. The boom in Rome's trade with India can be gauged from the increase in the number of Roman emporia and factories on the coasts of India, about which the anonymous Greek author of the "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea" reported for the first time in the late first century A.D., followed by Ptolemy in c. A.D. 140.<sup>2</sup> The innumerable Roman coins found in India and Plinius' lament that no year passes without India collecting at least 50 million sesterces are no less eloquent testimonies to this. Indian kings in turn sent many embassies to Rome. Four are known in the period of Augustus alone. Trajan received, after his return to Rome in A.D. 106, numerous ambassadors of "barbarian" kings, particularly from India and even granted to them seats of the honourable senators during the great imperial ceremonies. The most famous archaeological find of Indian origin in the West might be the magnificent ivory statuette of a female figure (*yakṣī*) found in Pompeii, which had certainly reached there before A.D. 79, when Pompeii was destroyed by the eruption of the Vesuvius. But there are other archaeological witnesses to Indian influence in, and contacts with, the Near East and Europe. Hermann Goetz found an unfinished early Indian temple at Petra in Transjordan<sup>3</sup> and more recently a small *circa* sixth century bronze sculpture of the Buddha of supposed north-western Indian origin was discovered in Helgoe, an early Swedish trading centre west of Stockholm.<sup>4</sup>

It was during the period of the rule of the Central Asian Kuṣāṇas in northern India that the Eurasian cultural and economic network became particularly evident. The Yue-chi, a Central Asian tribe which had already invaded Bactria at the end of the second century B.C., conquered northern India in the first century A.D. Their first king, Kujula Kadphises, had his coins initially minted with the portrait of the last known Greek king, Hermaios, but then replaced his portrait with one very similar to that of Emperor Augustus. Aware of the signs of the time, his successors changed the coinage of his empire from the Greek to the Roman system. The coins and titles of the Kuṣāṇa kings amply bear out the cosmopolitan Eurasian culture of the Kuṣāṇas, whose empire stretched from Central Asia up to the central Ganga valley. Besides the Greek title *Soter Megas*, some of them also bore the three titles *mahārāja*, *rājādhirāja* and *devaputra*. The title

2 The latest cartographic version is found in J.E. Schwartzberg, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia* (Chicago, 1978), plate III, C 5.

3 H. Goetz, "An Unfinished Early Indian Temple at Petra, Transjordan" in *East and West*, NS, Vol. 24 (1974), pp. 245-48.

4 A. Christopherson, "Big Chiefs and Buddhas in the Heart of Swedish Homeland" in *Thirteen Studies on Helgoe* (Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm, 1988), pp. 51-59.

*mahārāja* ("great king") originated from the Indian royal ideology. *Rājādhirāja* ("king of kings") means the same as the Persian title *Šāhanušāhu* or its Greek translation *Basileus Basileon*, which was brought to India by the Graeco-Bactrian kings and is likewise testified to in numerous coins of the Kuṣāṇas. The title *devaputra* ("son of the gods") is derived from the Chinese imperial claim and its "divine mandate". Presumably a few years after Emperor Trajan had advanced up to the Tigris (in A.D. 114-16), the Kuṣāṇa King Kaniṣka II added to these titles one more and also called himself "Kaisara" in an inscription.<sup>5</sup> With that, all the four major Eurasian empires at that time—Rome and the Parthian, Indian and Chinese empires—had found entry into the titles of a Kuṣāṇa king of India. Scarcely could any other example better illustrate the nexus in the Eurasian ecumenism of antiquity.

These links, however, were in no way limited only to the economic and short-lived political relations. They appeared still more clearly and permanently in the cultural-religious sphere. Thus, the Indian Emperor Aśoka sent messengers of his Buddhist faith far into the west shortly before 250 B.C. and announced this in a large number of inscriptions: to Antiyoka (Antiochos II Theos of Syria), to king of the Yonas (Greeks), to Turamaya (Ptolemaios II Philadelphos of Egypt), Antikini (Antigonos Gonates of Macedonia), Maka (Magas of Cyrene in North Africa) and Alikasudara (Alexander of Epirus?) as well as to south India and Sri Lanka, and perhaps to Burma, too. Aśoka's "missionary activities" were a unique event in the contemporary world. Greek-Aramaic bilingual inscriptions of Aśoka, discovered more recently in Afghanistan, form a further witness to his missionary activities in the west. However, Aśoka's missions to north-western India and Sri Lanka had a far more lasting impact than his missionary activities in the far west. Strengthened by the relations of the Indo-Greeks, Scythians and Kuṣāṇas with Central Asia, Buddhism spread from north-western India along the "silk road" to China, which it already reached in the first century A.D.

Buddhism, however, did not stand alone. Large parts of Eurasia were seized during this period with strong messianic hopes and movements—another important evidence for the existence of Eurasian network of historical processes. While St. Thomas was doing missionary work at the court of the Indo-Parthian King Gondophares (c. A.D. 20-46), the alleged "Caspas" of the three "Holy Kings" of Christianity, and, later on, "Thomas-Christians" in south India and Nestorians in Central Asia were encountering Buddhist monks, early Christianity in the west came into conflict with the Persian Mithra cult of the Roman soldiers. This conflict was soon followed by the challenge of Manichaeism. The latter had been founded by the Persian Mani of Babylonian birth who had stayed in north-western India for one and a half years before he began to preach his doctrines about A.D. 242. Mani looked upon Zarathustra, the Buddha and Christ as his predecessors, which is yet another indicator of the emergence of an early ecumenical cultural network. Centuries later we meet Islam as yet another culmination of this intensive encounter of minds and religious movements which transformed the ancient world. If we refrain from restricting Eurasian relations exclusively to the economic and political spheres, then the so-called classical antiquity was a period of most intensive Eurasian history.

5 No. 51, Ārā inscription of Kaniṣka II from the year 41 in D.C. Sircar, ed, *Select Inscriptions bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, Vol.I (Calcutta, 1965), p.154.

## V

This ecumenism of antiquity was deeply convulsed in the fifth century A.D. by nomadic movements, which again found its origin in Central Asia. Struggles of the Central Asian nomadic peoples and kingdoms, particularly of the Hiung-nu, against China under the powerful Han dynasty (206 B.C.—A.D. 220) had already spurred in the second century B.C. avalanche-like migratory movements in East and Central Asia which had advanced into Bactria and Persia. The Yue-chi, from whom the empire of the Kuṣāṇas emerged, belonged to them. Whereas these earlier nomadic tribes had been integrated into the existing political system of Asia, the world of antiquity began to disintegrate under the impact of the Huns, distant “relatives” of the Hiung-nu, and the tribes set in motion by them. By their attack on the Alans and Goths in A.D. 375 they set afoot the Germanic migration of peoples and thus brought about—even though only indirectly—the decline of the Roman Empire. In India, too, the fall of the “classical empire” of Indian antiquity, the Gupta Empire, was influenced by these Central Asian movements. The first invasion of the Huns—or the Hūṇas of Indian inscriptions—could be warded off in India, too, about A.D. 455, only a few years after the great leader of the Western Huns, Attila, had been defeated in the Catalaunian fields in France. But the Gupta Empire began to break up in the following years under their attacks and north-western India became for a few decades part of a Central Asian Hun Empire. The rule of the Huns over northern India was no doubt brief, for already by A.D. 528 they were defeated in India. But the direct and indirect results were again of greater significance. Although their inroads had not reached up to the eastern centre of the Gupta Empire, everywhere the centrifugal forces were set free, forces to which the Gupta state finally succumbed in the sixth century. Culturally the consequences were no less enduring, since the rich trading towns of the north-west and the great Buddhist monasteries were a major target of the Huns. Both these pillars of the classical culture of Indian antiquity did not recover from this blow. Another heritage of the Huns in India comprised those tribes which appear to have penetrated into north-western India in their train. In course of the following three centuries, they mixed with indigenous tribes and emerged as Rajputs who shaped in the next millennium the history of northern India. The emergence of these tribes and their rise to statehood from the seventh century onwards mark the end of the classical period and the beginning of the Middle Ages in northern India.

It is unnecessary to describe in detail the results of this period of migration for the history of Rome and Europe. However, at least hypothetically it can be stated that the historical processes in India and Europe, as one and a half millennia earlier in the wake of the Indo-European migrations, were again strongly and almost simultaneously affected by similar or even the same impulses “from outside”. They, too, influenced similarly the further course of history in both these subcontinental regions. Cultural ecumenism and international trade declined and the classical empires of antiquity receded in favour of an increasing regionalization of the political and cultural development. These processes were accompanied by a simultaneous shifting of the respective centres of historical development to the periphery of the earlier core region of historical development. In Europe these were the areas on the two sides of the Rhine, Gallia and Spain and particularly East Rome with Constantinople. In South Asia, it was now the turn of central and south India where the formation of regional kingdoms (for example, by the Cālukyas) began during these centuries. Justinian (A.D. 527-65) of East Rome succeeded in halting this process to a considerable extent, but only temporarily. Still less successful was King

Harṣa in north India, who succeeded in the first half of the seventh century in reuniting northern India again, though for only one generation, and in controlling parts of central India.

## VI

Rome dominated ecumenism of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern classical antiquity came to an end with the emergence of the Arabs and their new world religion of Islam. Already ten years after Mohammed's death in A.D. 632 Syria, Egypt and Persia fell. Soon afterwards, Europe and India were once again simultaneously affected by one and the same process from outside. In A.D. 711 Tarik conquered Gibraltar, which is named after him, and the Arabs stood at the Indus and conquered parts of north-western India. In the early eighth century the advance of Islam came to a halt temporarily before the walls of Constantinople, in France and also in India. Nevertheless the triumphal march of Islam in the seventh and early eighth centuries signifies the final end of the world of antiquity. The unity of the Mediterranean world, sustained by Eastern Rome for centuries in the East, broke down and it bifurcated into the Islamic Orient (with its extension in Central Asia) and the Christian West. In India, too, the advance of the Arabs, although marginal in the following centuries, laid the foundation for the present-day division of the subcontinent.

For Europe, the German medievalist H. Grundmann drew the conclusion: "The antique world was disintegrated, cut up, its heritage scattered.... This dismemberment of the antique Mediterranean world was the prerequisite for the origin of the European Middle Ages". Grundmann then raised some questions which sound quite familiar in the Indian context, too: "Did the late antique Mediterranean empire break up because Germanic tribes broke in across its northern frontiers? Or could they break in only because the empire had already succumbed to an inner crisis? Or was it fully destroyed only by the invasion of the Arabs and of Islam into its southern provinces of Asia Minor across North Africa to Spain"?<sup>6</sup> As is well known, H. Pirenne decided these questions in favour of the Arabs. Not the Germanic migration but the surprising advance of the Arabs destroyed the unity of the antique Mediterranean world and the West was cut off and forced to live by itself in an enclosed space. According to Pirenne, it was only after the Arab conquest that the axis of historical life in Europe shifted from the Mediterranean to the north. During this period a new age, the Middle Ages, emerged in Europe, characterized by feudalism. The transition period of this process lasted the entire span between A.D. 650 and 750.<sup>7</sup>

It is not my intention to provide an answer to these important questions of periodization with regard to India also. We may not subscribe to all the questions of Grundmann and disagree with Pirenne's interpretation. However, their relevance to the Indian context, too, can be taken as a further example of the chronological and structural proximity of certain historical phases in European and Asian history. Almost the same questions have been put to Indian historiography and here, too, the answers to these questions depend largely on the emphasis which individual historians lay either on the external impulses or on the indigenous historical processes.

6 H. Grundmann, *Über die Welt des Mittelalters* ("The World of the Middle Ages") in *Propyläen Weltgeschichte* (Frankfurt, 1965), Vol. 9, p. 385f.

7 H. Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London, 1939); see also A.F. Havighurst, ed. *The Pirenne Thesis: Analysis, Criticism and Revision* (Lexington, 1969); and R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe* (London, 1983).



Traditional Indian historians equate the beginning of the Indian Middle Ages with the decline of the Gupta Empire in c. A.D. 500, while Muslim historians identify the Indian Middle Ages exclusively with the period of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire which began seven centuries later about A.D. 1200. A smaller group of Marxist and economically and socio-historically oriented historians regard the formation of the Indian regional empires in the post-Harṣa period (seventh century) and the emergence of feudal-like agrarian structures as indicators of the beginning of early medieval India which lasted up to c. A.D. 1200, whereas other scholars try to avoid as far as possible the terms "Middle Ages" and "medieval" in the Indian context.

The correspondence between the uncertainties of European and Indian periodization of the Middle Ages has at least partly its basis in the historical processes of these two subcontinental Eurasian regions being similarly and simultaneously affected by two violent impulses within about three centuries: by a process of migration of peoples during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. which originated in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and by a militant Arabic Islam issuing from the Near East in the seventh and eighth centuries. They brought to an end the classical antiquity in Europe and India and pushed the historical processes in both regions in a quite similar (or at least comparable) direction. The decay of the early centrally administered empires, the immigration and settling of new tribes in Europe and north India, the rise of new "post-tribal" principalities in Central and Western Europe as well as in central, eastern and southern India led to strikingly similar attempts to overcome the crisis and find new forms of socio-economic and political organization. Initially in both cases the result was a regionally oriented state with strong local autonomy based on a prevalent agrarian society with different degrees of feudalization. The cultural heritage of the preceding classical period continued in both cases—as Max Weber put it—in the hierocratic powers. They developed new institutions—the Christian Church and the brāhmaṇa temples, which formed distinct socio-cultural features of the respective "medieval" cultures of Europe and India. Moreover, in both cases the cultural development of the Middle Ages was characterized by the "selection" to which the Christian Church and Indian brāhmaṇas submitted their respective heritages, for in both cases only a part of the heritage was preserved. The Greek heritage in the West and the Buddhist heritage in India were partly neglected or even suppressed. In contrast to the culture of the preceding classical empires, the cultures of Europe and India distinguished themselves to a surprisingly similar extent through regionalization and a limitation, which a German medievalist had once termed with reference to the Carolingian Empire as "begrenzter Universalismus" (limited universalism).<sup>8</sup>

## VII

However, neither Greek philosophy and science nor Buddhism were lost. They survived in Islamic West and Central Asia and in Eastern Asia respectively transmitted by a Eurasian network of communication of ideas. In this context, the importance of Pirenne's "southern and eastern half" of the former classical world, that is, Islamic Spain, North Africa, Near East and Central Asia cannot be overrated. If one reads, for instance, W. Montgomery Watt's lectures at the College de France which were published in 1972 under the title *The Influence of Islam on*

8 P. Classen, "Karl der Grosse, das Papsttum und Byzanz. Die Begründung des karolingischen Kaisertums" ("Charlemagne, Popedom and Byzantium: The Foundation of the Carolingian Empire") in H. Beumann, ed. *Karl der Grosse* (1968).

*Medieval Europe*, one realizes to what extent the Islamic world had for centuries become the true successor of the classical world. Acting likewise as a gravitational field and as an epicentre, it formed the centre of a flourishing medieval Eurasian network of communication, geographically by far outranging its classical predecessor. What is most fascinating is not only the well-known resurgence of classical knowledge and its transmission to Europe, but also its Indian blending in various fields of science, particularly mathematics. Many examples of the existence of this medieval Eurasian network of communication could be quoted. A few typical ones among contemporaries at the turn of the first millennium A.D. are Ibn Sina (better known as Avicenna in the West) for his medical and philosophical works, Firdausi for his unique epic world history *Shahnāma*, and Albiruni for his *Tārīkhū'l-Hind*. *Albiruni's India*, as it has become known through its translation by E.C. Sachau, forms the most comprehensive and learned study ever written in pre-modern times by a stranger on a foreign country and its culture, which *per se* is an unfailing indicator of the existence of this medieval network of communication. The works of these and other authors were as deeply rooted in the classical heritage as they were an outcome of the intrinsic medieval cultural relations, linking the Mediterranean with the Near East, Central and South Asia.

This "western network", however, did not end in Central and South Asia. It was strongly interlinked with an overlapping "eastern network", operating mainly between India and China through Central and South-East Asia. The spread of Buddhism and Hinduism in South-East Asia, too, was a major result of these relations. As they had begun in the classical period and continued throughout the early centuries of the Middle Ages, they are of little value for the suggested periodization of the classical and Middle Ages in this part of Eurasia. However, the spread of Indian and Chinese cultures to their respective neighbouring countries and their mutual penetration in Central and South-East Asia is no less a witness to the existence of a medieval network of cultural communication in these parts of Eurasia than similar developments in the western parts of the Eurasian continent.

### VIII

Let me now come back to another major issue of this paper, that is, common Eurasian periodization and the question whether the term "Middle Ages" is valid for Indian history, too. I would like to illustrate the relevance of this question by a few seemingly surprising parallels in the development of the Middle Ages in Europe and contemporary India.

In a German article on the structure of the Franconian Empire the German historian Josef Fleckenstein describes the institution of the counties as instruments of the Merovingian rulers for the political integration of the Franconian kingdom. This endeavour, however, succeeded only under the Carolingians, and even then only temporarily. In A.D. 614 King Chlothar II committed himself in his Paris edict not to appoint the counts freely any more, but to choose them from the local landlords of the respective province.<sup>9</sup> Thus the count became not merely an officer, but also a prince in his province, a participant in the rule of the kingdom which, with the receding of the Roman institutions, assumed more and more clearly the characteristics of a

9 J. Fleckenstein, *Das Grossfränkische Reich: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Grossreichsbildung im Mittelalter* ("The Franconian Empire: Possibilities and Limitations of Imperial State Formation in the Middle Ages") in *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol.232 (1981), pp. 265-94.

personal federation.

In India, too, after the decline of the classical empire of the Guptas in the sixth century there occurred a similar shift of emphasis to the disadvantage of the central kingdom. The rule of King Harṣa (A.D. 606-47), who once again united the whole of northern and eastern India for the last time before the emergence of the medieval regional kingdoms, is marked by the rise of the *sāmanta* princes. Originally signifying independent neighbouring princes, the term *sāmanta* referred at a later stage to tributary princes after their subjugation. But in India, too, from the early seventh century the allodial rulers rose like the local aristocracy in the Merovingian kingdom to be partners and increasingly even rivals of the kingdom. Thus there began a development which led in the following centuries to the "sāmantization" of the regional kingdoms of India. Even if one may hesitate to look upon this development as an Indian variant of feudalism, there can be no doubt that in India the ever increasing number of land donations to temples and brāhmaṇas and the granting of a large number of immunities created socio-economic and political structures which came very close to feudalism of the early European Middle Ages.

Medieval historiography and world view are other fields of strange correspondence between medieval India and Europe. In A.D. 1146 Bishop Otto von Freising (near Munich) wrote his famous chronicle which is regarded as the most comprehensive "world history" of the European Middle Ages. In the same year the Kashmiri brāhmaṇa Kalhaṇa was working on the final chapters of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (the "Stream of Kings"), the chronicle of Kashmir which he concluded towards the end of the next year as the most important chronicle of pre-Islamic Indian historiography. However, more important than this accidentally exact temporal coincidence of the completion of these two great chronicles of medieval Germany and India are similarities in the perception of history in the historical writings of the German and the Indian Middle Ages. They are based on the idea of a temporal order set by God, into which all events from creation up to the "last age" have to be accommodated. In both cases the so-called medieval period was, therefore, not understood as the "Middle Ages", but as the ultimate age which, in Christian Europe, preceded the coming of the anti-Christ and the return of Jesus Christ. Even if the idea of the four ages in India and the last of them, the present Kaliyuga, was associated with a cyclic perception of the cosmic ages, Indians, too, looked upon themselves as living in the ultimate age. Just as in the European Middle Ages, for Indians, too, the world as a whole was only perceptible between creation and end.

Medieval man was, however, not only bound to a teleological conception of history; this conception also assigned to him a firm spatial location in cosmos and on the earth. Holy Jerusalem lay at the centre of the concentrically ordered medieval world, an idea which has some correspondence in Indian cosmography with Meru, the central mountain of the gods, and the seven concentric oceans and continents. This cosmographic world view, as known in Europe from many medieval world maps, was superimposed and permeated by the cosmological idea of the earth being the body of God. Both these ideas recur in the iconology of the Christian churches and the Hindu temple architecture. Church and temple embody Holy Jerusalem or Mount Meru of the gods, as much as the crucified Christ and—in India—the mythical primeval being (*Puruṣa*), who had been sacrificed for the creation of the world.

In contrast to these cosmogonic and cosmographic speculations of the Middle Ages—or perhaps even as a reaction to their esoteric character—the Middle Ages in India and Europe

produced a large number of religious movements which can be assigned to the realm of folk religion. At the time when in Europe the cult of relics and pilgrimage developed at innumerable local shrines, in India *bhakti* religiosity became the true folk religion. This religiosity of grace, which in its beginning often stood in direct conflict with orthodoxy and sometimes emerged in pre-Hindu or pre-Christian places of worship, resulted in both cases in a regionalization of these two world religions. Pilgrimages and the closely woven network of their local and regional centres belonged in the West as well as in India to the characteristic peculiarities of medieval religiosity.

As yet another example of these obvious parallel developments between medieval Europe and South Asia, one may mention the emergence of the regional languages and their literatures. From the beginning of the second millennium A.D. the vernacular languages (*bhāṣās*) of India came to prevail roughly at the same time and occasionally under quite similar conditions on the foundation of, and sometimes in conflict with, the classical Indian language of Sanskrit, as happened in Europe with regard to Latin. The evolution of the languages strengthened in both cases the process of "regionalization" during the following centuries and—in Europe—the growth of the European nations.

## IX

Even if these parallel developments in the period of the European and Indian Middle Ages may have been chosen rather arbitrarily, they may be just as paradigmatic for the emergence of a medieval ecumenism as the above examples were indicating the existence of an earlier, classical ecumenism. The existence of a Eurasian medieval ecumenism might have escaped the notice of historians because of the historiographically deeply rooted religio-cultural barriers between the respective Christian-European, Islamic-Near Eastern, Hindu-Indian or Confucian-Chinese heritages. But these parallel developments are by no means the only indicators of medieval Eurasian relations, for, in the Middle Ages, too, which are often looked upon as the age of the "isolated cultures", the Eurasian continent continued to be covered by a network of direct and indirect relationships. Here once again mention of just a few examples would suffice.

One of the prerequisites for the continuation of the relations of the medieval Christian West with India was the knowledge—even though often only fragmentary—of the classical authors and their reports on India and the Near East which kept alive the interest of the West in the countries of Asia. Thus, for example, India is mentioned at least ten times in Otto von Freising's above mentioned chronicle. Occasionally there existed direct political contacts, too. Charlemagne's successful negotiations with Harun al-Rashid for the right of protection of the holy Christian places in Jerusalem is mentioned in Einhard's contemporary biography of Charlemagne (*Vita Karoli Magni*) of the early ninth century. But what is more interesting in our context is Einhard's statement that Harun al-Rashid ruled over the entire Orient with the exception of India.<sup>10</sup> Here obviously quite precise knowledge about the political situation even beyond Harun al-Rashid's domain existed. Other strange pieces of information, too, appear to have been available. Thus, for example, in the *Annolied* of the eleventh century it is stated: "People report that there in that region still men are living who speak German, far towards

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10 G. Waitz, ed. *Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni* (Hanover, 1911), p.19.

India",<sup>11</sup> seemingly anticipating the findings of nineteenth century Indo-Germanic studies!

One of the major motives of the European Middle Ages to strive for knowledge about the distant lands of Asia was Christianity which had spread in the first half of the first millennium A.D. over large areas of Asia. This applies particularly to the Nestorians who spread across Central Asia to China where they enjoyed temporarily in the seventh century even imperial support. Direct contacts with the Christians of Asia widened the knowledge of the West. A Bishop from Persia and India is reported to have participated in the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. Exactly two hundred years later, the Greek trader Cosmas Indikopleustes ("the traveller to India") began his journey *via* the East African and Persian coasts to south India and Sri Lanka, on which he later reported in detail in his "Topographia Christiana". The quest for contacts with the Thomas Christians of south India rose in the following centuries to such intensity that Alfred the Great of England was induced in A.D. 883 even to send Bishop Sigelmus of Sherborne to India.

The interest of Europe in the Orient had an unusual upsurge in the age of the Crusades. Europe had been drawn into the political complex of events of the Islamic Orient for over a century and a half, when not only wars were fought in the name of the Cross but emperors and kings of Europe even entered into treaties with the Islamic rulers of the Orient. No doubt, the Crusades had begun with the aim of liberating Christendom in the Orient from Islam. But what remained at the end as the most important result was—as an apparent paradox of world history—the strong influence of Arabian scholarship and science and their Greek sources on Europe.

The struggle for the holy places of the Christians widened considerably Europe's awareness of the East. At the latest, since the terrible catastrophe in which the second Crusade (A.D. 1147-49) had ended, any victory of a Central Asian power over a Muslim state in the Near East was bound to awaken hopes in the West of getting support from the Far East in the fight for the holy places. The first occasion for such hopes appeared in those years when the reconquest of Edessa by the Islamic armies terrified Europe and thus launched the second Crusade. In A.D. 1141 the mighty Seljuk ruler Sanjar suffered a disastrous defeat near Samarkand at the hands of the Kara-Kitai tribe, which was close to the Mongols. Since its Great Khan Yeliutashi and some of his people were intimately connected with Nestorian Christianity, his victory kindled hopes in Europe at a time of the gravest danger for the holy places of Christianity.. It was in this situation that the legendary figure of the holy "Priest King John" emerged, who, coming from the East, would save hard pressed Christianity from Islam. He is mentioned for the first time in the chronicle of Otto von Freising, who heard about him from a Syrian Bishop in A.D. 1145, a year before his chronicle was completed. "He (the Bishop) narrated that a few years earlier a certain John, a king and priest (*rex et sacerdos*), who resided in the extreme Orient, beyond Persia and Armenia, and, like his people, was Christian, although a Nestorian, had attacked two brothers, the kings of Persia and Medes, called Samiards, and conquered their capital Ekbatana". Furthermore, Otto von Freising narrates that after this victory John had launched a campaign "to come to the help of the Church in Jerusalem".<sup>12</sup> However, after many years of waiting in vain he did not succeed in crossing the Tigris and returned to his kingdom—a quite euphemistic statement of Otto for the disappointing failure of any relief from the East.

11 C. Kraus and M. Roediger, ed, *Der Trierer Silvester. Das Annolied* (1895).

12 Otto Bischof von Freising, *Chronik oder die Geschichte der zwei Staaten* ("Chronicle or the History of the Two States"), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, ed, A. Hofmeister (Hanover, 1912), VII. 3.

Expectations of help from a Christian king from the East grew in the subsequent decades to such an extent that in the period about A.D. 1165 Pope Alexander III, the German Kaiser Barbarossa and the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I received letters from the priest king John. Even though these letters have for long been recognized as forgeries, they had nevertheless the historically unique result that on 27 September 1177 Pope Alexander answered from Venice in a special letter to the "indorum regi, sacerdotum sanctissimo", which he sent through his trusted personal physician Philippus, an expert of the Orient, to the priest John.<sup>13</sup>

How far Philippus reached with this letter and why the kingdom of the priest king John had been "shifted" in the mean time from Central Asia to India (and later even to Christian Ethiopia) are of no importance in the present context. What is important is that in the next century, from A.D. 1245 onwards, several Christian ambassadors like Giovanni del Carpini and Wilhelm Ruysbroek, also called Rubruk, commissioned by the Pope and the French King Louis the Saint, travelled to the court of the Mongolian Great Khans in Karakorum. Ultimately they undertook these travels with the same hope with which Pope Alexander had written his letter to John, the priest king in India. In fact, several members of the Mongolian court—for example, the mother of the Great Khans Moengke and Kublai Khan—were Christians. It was, no doubt, a great event in medieval Eurasian history when, in A.D. 1254, Moengke arranged in his capital a religious discussion between the Christians, Buddhists and Mohammedans for the benefit of Wilhelm Rubruk, who had travelled to Mongolia on behalf of the French king. Even though these missions failed, it was of the greatest importance for future Eurasian history that only a few decades later, following the paths of these ambassadors, Marco Polo went to China, where he occupied high administrative posts at the court of the great Kublai Khan between A.D. 1275 and 1292. His report of his stay in China and of his journeys, particularly his return trip *via* South-East Asia and India, forms the most important medieval European account of Asia. In its historical significance it may be equated with Ibn Battuta's contemporary travel account and with the report of Megasthenes written about one and a half millennia earlier. These reports were not only important testimonies of individual "world travellers"; Ibn Battuta's and Marco Polo's reports are also above all documents of the existence of a network of intensive medieval Eurasian relations which made these journeys possible. At the same time, Marco Polo's report deeply influenced the future of these relations. Thus it was no mere chance that Columbus had on board a copy of Marco Polo's "Description of the World" when he discovered America while attempting to reach directly by sea the lands described by Marco Polo.

Moreover, the profound influence of the Orient, and indirectly of India too, on European culture from the period of the Crusades deserves mention. Oriental and Indian influences on Wolfram von Eschenbach's medieval German mythical poem *Parzival* have often been pointed out. And as already in Imperial Rome, the Orient again evoked a particular fascination in the field of ideology of kingship in medieval Europe. Here too we may mention John, the priest king. In the course of centuries he was glorified in prophecies and stories as an ideal Christian king and he absorbed in ever greater measure Oriental symbolism of imperial power. In the late Middle Ages he was praised as the ideal king in the mystical-eschatological speculations by the unknown author of the *Reformation of German Emperor Sigismund*, who wrote in the year 1439:

13 For texts of the letters of John to Manuel I and of Alexander III to John ("Presbytero Joanni, Indorum regi"), see F. Zarncke, "Der Priester Johannes" in *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, Vol. 7 (1879), pp. 825-1028.

“A priest is emperor in India; there nobody can become an emperor unless he is a priest”.<sup>14</sup>

Eurasian cultural relations emerged most impressively in the Middle Ages in the realm of literature. Numerous fairy tales, legends and edifying stories “wandered” in course of centuries, like that of Sindbad the Sailor, from India across the Near East to Europe, where they merged into the national literatures through repeatedly new translations into European languages. Two examples may suffice to illustrate this. The story of Barlaam and Josaphat (or Joasaph), one of the popular Christian stories of medieval Europe, can be traced back to the Buddha legend of the *Lalitavistara*, whereby Barlaam stands for Bhagavān and Josaphat for the Bodhisattva, the future Buddha. A Persian translation of their legend of the sixth or seventh century was then translated into Arabic and Syrian. The Greek and the Georgian translations emerged from the Syrian story. The Greek version in its turn formed the basis for the Hebrew, Ethiopian, Armenian, Church-Slavonic, Russian and Romanian texts. A Latin translation was then translated into other European languages like German, the first of which was made in c. A.D. 1120. Still more spectacular was the triumphal march of the *Pañcatantra*, a manual of instruction for politically sagacious action in the form of fables.<sup>15</sup> With its translation into over fifty languages, the *Pañcatantra* enjoyed, together with the *Bible*, the widest circulation in the pre-modern world. By order of the great Persian King Khusru it had been translated from Sanskrit into Persian in the sixth century A.D. There followed translations into Arabic (eighth century), Hebrew (twelfth century) and Latin (thirteenth century), which was then translated into many European languages, for example, into German in A.D. 1480.

When we further consider that Europe’s so-called “Arabic” numerals are likewise of Indian origin, as is the “zero”, which became known in Europe from the eleventh century, and remember the Indian origin of quite a few German words as, for instance, of *brille* (spectacles, from middle Indian *beruliya*, Latin *berillus*) and *zucker* (sugar, from middle Indian *sakkara*, Arabic *sukkar*) and the Indian origin of the chess game, we get an idea of the flourishing pre-modern network of cultural relations between India, the Near East and Europe.

## X

If we now return to the question about the validity of the term “Indian Middle Ages”—or “medieval India”—one may question the usefulness of the above list of seemingly incoherent historical events and vaguely defined relations between Europe and certain regions of Asia. However, we are convinced that none of these relations and events happened by mere chance. On the contrary, they are the few stones left over of a mosaic depicting joint historical processes of mutually interrelated regions of the Eurasian continent. All these regions or subcontinents, for instance, the European and the Indian ones, were shaped by their own autonomous historical processes. Yet in the broader context of Eurasian history these developments may also be viewed as sub-processes of much more comprehensive processes of Eurasian history. These Eurasian historical developments originated in a composition of mutually interrelated but spatially dispersed origins of history. In course of time a web-like fabric of Eurasian historical processes developed. The cohesion of these processes (which may be compared with the warps of textile) was maintained and sometimes even strengthened not only through various impacts which acted

14 H. Koller, ed, *Reformation Kaiser Sigismunds* (Stuttgart, 1964), p. 243.

15 J. Hertel, *Das Pañcatantra. Seine Geschichte und seine Verbreitung* (Leipzig, 1914), is a hitherto unsurpassed fascinating document of medieval Eurasian cultural history.

as the wefts of the fabric of Eurasian history. The cohesive power of trade and religious movements was in no way less important than the impact of better known historical events, for example, movements of peoples or the establishment of trans-regional states such as the Achaemenid, Roman or Arabian "World Empires".

The fabric of Eurasian history, particularly its colours, may be shaped by the great historical events with weft-like impact. But perhaps more important are the less colourful periods of adjustment and restructuring which followed these dramatic events. In fact, the comparative study of these periods in various Eurasian regions may turn out to be much more fascinating than highlighting historical events and evidence of direct interaction and relations. Thus, for instance, the comparative study of the "sub-processes" of *synoikismos* in Greece and of contemporary early state formation in the Gangetic plain or, of course, of early medieval state formation in Europe and India (with all its implication in regard to a comparative study of different types of feudal or feudal-like structures) would be of the greatest importance for a further elucidation of the fabric of Eurasian history.

## XI

The present exposition does not even strive to contribute new ideas to such comparative studies. It merely seeks to raise the question of the existence of a fabric of pre-modern Eurasian historical processes in order to delink the problem of a joint Eurasian periodization from its Eurocentric bias. Once we agree to the existence of continuously interrelated Eurasian historical processes in which India and Europe participated, just as other regions of the Eurasian continent did, the question of Eurocentric periodization does not arise. The mere fact that this periodization was developed first in early modern European historiography should not be a sufficient reason for its not being "allowed" to be used in its broader Eurasian context and instead splitting up Eurasian history into various "subcontinental" systems of strictly regional periodization. However, in regard to fine adjustment, regional periodization will continue to be of importance.

European historiography, too, requires regional adjustments in this regard. Thus, for instance, there existed no "classical period" or "antiquity" in Scandinavian history. Yet there is no harm in speaking of a medieval Scandinavian history in the context of the established European periodization. The same should be true, for instance, in regard to Kerala and Assam in South Asia and the Malay world in South-East Asia. Even though these regions did not develop an (early) classical period, we need not hesitate to speak of medieval Kerala and Assam or of medieval Indonesia in the broader context of Eurasian history.

A final remark regarding the term Middle Ages. As has already been pointed out, this paper aims at defending the *period* of the Middle Ages in the context of Eurasian history rather than the term itself. We may finally conclude that the terms "medieval" and "Middle Ages" are inappropriate, as none of the Eurasian peoples of this period had ever themselves claimed to live in the "middle ages". We should not, however, hesitate to use it for the sake of comparative studies in Eurasian history as long as a better one has not been coined.