The seven oceans in the *Purāṇas* and elsewhere¹

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Abstract

It is unclear when the notion of seven oceans originated. The Vedas have only four oceans. However, the seven oceans are present in the much later *Purāṇas*. The oceans seem to represent a fantasy about the good things in life, such as milk, curd, ghee, wine, and sugar cane juice. The same picture is present in the *Mahābhārata* with the exception of the sugar cane ocean. These oceans also represent a transition from cattle-herding nomadic society to a settled agricultural society. Although there is a description of a ritual called the *saptasāgaramahādāna* in the *Matsyapurāṇa*, performed by merchants before sailing out on a trading expedition, the *Purāṇas* were written by Brahmins for Brahmins.

The seven oceans in the Buddhist literature are very different, even though they share the same names to a certain extent. Here we are clearly dealing with merchants crossing dangerous oceans in pursuit of riches, which in its own way corroborates the fact that Buddhism was an anti-brahminical sect with its main following among vaiśyas and kṣatriyas.

¹ This article is a considerably extended version of a paper presented at the XIIIth World Sanskrit Conference in Edinburgh in 2006.

The much later 16th century Avadhī poem *Padumāvat* by Mālik Muhammad Jāyasī reverts back to the purāṇic oceans, but here the oceans represent the trials and tribulations the hero, king Ratan Sen of Chittaur has to go through in his search for Princess Padmāvatī, whose enticing beauty had been described by a parrot brought all the way from Sinhaladvīpa to Chittaur by a poor Brahmin.

In the two latter cases the oceans differ from the purāṇic ones insofar that there are no islands separating each ocean. It would be impossible to sail from one ocean to another in the purāṇic versions, since one will have to traverse an island to reach another ocean.

Keywords: fantasy oceans, trade, dangers, riches, nomadic society to agricultural society to trading society, quest for love and beauty.

“Just imagine the oceans were vodka, and the brooks all Bavarian beer, and our springs would pour forth Chianti, with cognac in pond, lake and mere.”²

“Tänk om alla sjöar vore brännvin, och alla bäckar vore bayersk öl, vin och öl i våra källor, och konjak i varje liten pöl.”

This is the beginning of a Swedish drinking song. Its relevance for this paper is not as obscure as it seems – as will be made clear later.

It might seem odd that the ancient Aryans – whether they came from the North-West or were always there – had anything to say about oceans at all. However, the word *samudra* is well documented already in the Ṛgveda,³ and, more interestingly, the Vedic Aryans seemed to have believed that that were four oceans. However, the Vedic Aryans seemed to be landlocked and nomadic, so there cannot have been any trade over oceans.⁴ It seems, as we shall develop further below, that the notion of seven oceans was connected with trade on dangerous waters. There are, however, seven rishis, seven rivers, seven sins etc.

² This is a more poetic but slightly inexact rendering of the Swedish original.

³ See chapter III.3 “Der Weltozean im Veda“ and III.4 “*samudra* der Indische Ozean“ (pp. 92–111) in Lüders, Heinrich: *Varuṇa I. Varuṇa und die Wasser*, Göttingen 1951.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.106 and 107.

in the Vedas, so the number seven carried some symbolic meaning which was not extended to oceans.

The concept of seven oceans is, however, well established in the much later *Purāṇas*. They are enumerated in practically all of them, but not always in the same order. This is how Kirfel⁵ arranges them:

1st group	2nd group	3rd group
1. Lavaṇoda, Kṣāroda	1. Lavaṇoda	1. Lavaṇoda
2. Ikṣurasoda	2. Kṣīroda	2. Kṣīroda
3. Suroda	3. Ghṛta- (<i>Matsya</i> -) Dadhi-maṇḍoda (<i>Varāha</i> -)	3. Ghṛtoda
4. Ghṛtoda, Sarpis	4. Dadhi (<i>Matsya</i> -) Ghṛta-maṇḍoda (<i>Varāha</i> -)	4. Dadhimaṇḍodaka
5. Dadhimaṇḍodaka, Dadhi	5. Suroda	5. Suroda
6. Kṣīroda, Dugdha	6. Ikṣurasoda	
7. Svādūda(ka), Jala	7. Svādūdaka	6. Jalaśāgara

Kirfel's first group comprises most *Purāṇas* and the second group comprises the *Bhaviṣya*-, the *Matsya*- and the *Varāha-Purāṇa*. Kirfel's third group, which consists of only the *Padmapurāṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, has only six oceans, the missing seventh (or sixth, since all the lists seem to end with the sweet-water ocean) being the *ikṣurasa* ocean.⁶ The six oceans mentioned in the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* are the salt ocean in Mah. 6.6.14 (*lāvaṇena samudreṇa samantāt parivāritaḥ*), the milk ocean in 6.12.9 (*sāgaro 'pi vibhāgaśaḥ kṣīrodo bharataśreṣṭha yena saṃparivāritaḥ*) and then, in Mah. 6.13.2 we find the clarified butter ocean, the wine ocean, and the buttermilk, not curd, ocean. The last one which Kirfel labels *jalaśāgara* is not mentioned by that term. Instead we find a mysterious heat-ocean (*gharmasāgara*)⁷ which we presumably have to understand as the sweet water ocean. Or else, is it the missing *ikṣurasa* ocean?

⁵ Kirfel, Willibald: *Die Kosmographie der Inder*, Hildesheim 1967, p.57.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.56.

⁷ *Ghṛtatoyaḥ samudro 'tra dadhimaṇḍodako 'paraḥ / surodaḥ sāgaraś caiva tathānyo gharmasāgaraḥ* Mah. 6.13.2.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*⁸ tells us that the seven oceans were created when Priyavrata rode his chariot around the earth seven times, and the ruts left by the wheels became the beds of the oceans, separating the large continent into seven *dvīpas*. Only one of these oceans is what is ordinarily understood to be an ocean, namely a vast expanse of salt water.

All Kirfel's groups agree that the first ocean surrounding Jambudvīpa is the *kṣāra* or *lavaṇa* ocean, i.e. the salt ocean. Then follows pure fantasy: the sugarcane juice ocean, the liquor ocean, the clarified butter ocean, the curd or buttermilk ocean, the milk ocean and the sweet water ocean, the *svādūdaka samudra*, which is sometimes said to consist of pure holy water from *tīrthas*.

All these liquids, with the exception of the salt ocean, are very precious substances, something one could not indulge in except on festive occasions, just as the Swedish drinking song fantasy quoted in the beginning, although what was precious for the old Indians is of course somewhat, but not entirely, different from what is precious for the contemporary Swedes and other Scandinavians.

The milk, curd and ghee go back to a cattle-rearing possibly nomadic tribal society which we call the early Aryans. The sugarcane requires a settled, agricultural society. Sugarcane did not exist in the Western world until the Arabs brought it from India into the Mediterranean around the 8th century A.D. So the ancient Aryans who are said to have migrated into India did not know about sugarcane, which originated in southeast Asia, in Papua New Guinea.⁹ The word '*kuśara*' in *Ṛgveda* I.191.3, claimed by some to mean sugarcane¹⁰ is glossed by MW as 'a kind of reed' (and under *ku-* which might mean it was a bad weed) and not at all found in Āpte. However, the word *ikṣu* is attested in *Atharvaveda* 1.34.5¹¹ and the much later Kautilya

⁸ Bh.P. 8.4.

⁹ Achaya, K.T.: *Indian Food. A Historical Companion*, OUP, Bombay, Calcutta Madras 1994, p. 215ff. This is contradicted by G. Watts, who postulates a South Asian origin of sugarcane (see G. Watts: *The Commercial Products of India*, London 1908, pp. 930ff.).

¹⁰ Prakash, Om: *Economy and Food in Ancient India*. Part II: *Food*, Delhi –Varanasi, 1987, p. 75, note 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 75, n. 4.

mentions a whole range of sugar products from sugarcane.¹² So sugarcane must have been cultivated at an early stage, maybe by the non-Aryan peoples of India. The Vedic Aryans used honey, *madhu*, as sweetener.

The *surā samudra*, which follows the *ikṣurasa samudra* in most of the Purāṇas, should perhaps not be translated as wine ocean, since wine from grapes has only been made in India in recent years. Grapes are said to have been grown by the Aryans in “lands which were frequently flooded,”¹³ a somewhat strange statement. They were likely brought in by the Greeks, but there is no conclusive evidence that wine was made from grapes.¹⁴ *Surā* is usually liquor made from distilled, fermented barley, or wild paddy, flowers, or just about anything that can be fermented. Of course, it could even be fermented distilled *ikṣurasa*, in other words rum. Drinking was always popular, although it is considered one of the seven transgressions, *sapta maryādāḥ* – another group of seven! – in R̥gveda X.5.6.

The three oceans made from milk are curiously in inverted order. The normal order is that one makes *dadhi* from milk, and then *ghṛta* from *dadhi*. Not the other way around. The last ocean, the *svādūdaka samudra*, the tasty water ocean, is of course also very precious, especially if it consists of water from holy *tīrthas*.

The only really remarkable thing about the seven oceans in the Purāṇas is that, apart from the enumerations, nothing at all is said about them, whereas the islands *dvīpas* are described in lengthy details, their rivers, mountains, fauna and flora, inhabitants, etc. The purāṇic oceans are a pure fantasy which deliberately conceals the fact that the real ocean is very threatening indeed. Maybe by imagining the oceans as consisting of desirable liquids it was a way of averting its terrible force. This would explain the ritual of the *saptasāgaramahādāna*, a sacrifice described in detail in the *Matsya Purāṇa* chapter 287. V.S. Agrawala has written an illuminating article about this very sacrifice in an article published in the journal *Purāṇa*

¹² *Ibid.* p.169-170, n. 7, p. 384.

¹³ Achaya, *op. cit.* p.31.

¹⁴ Cf. Om Prakash, *op. cit.* pp. 404–405 and p. 438 under *mārdvika* with ref. to Kautilya, the *Suśruta saṃhitā* and the *Viṣṇudharmasūtra*.

1960.¹⁵ The sacrifice consists of putting salt (*lavaṇa*), milk (*payas*), clarified butter (*sarpis*), molasses (*guḍa*), curd (*dadhi*), sugar (*śarkara*), and finally holy water (*tīrthavāri*) in seven different basins or bowls (*kunḍas*) along with figures of Brahmā, which should be of gold, in the bowl with salt, Keśava/Viṣṇu in the milk bowl (*kṣīramadhye*), Maheśvara/Śiva in the ghee bowl (*ghṛtamadhye*), Bhāskara (i.e. Sūrya) in the molasses (*guḍamadhye*), Nīśādhipa (i.e. the Moon/Chandra) in the curd (*dadhimadhye*), Lakṣmī in the bowl with sugar (*śarkarāyām*) and finally Pārvatī in the pure water bowl (*jalamadhye*). Then the sacrificer should put gems and grain also in each bowl. All this is presumably poured or thrown into a well with the appropriate rites. Note that in this passage (*Matsyapurāṇa* 287:5–9) have here two kinds of sweet, *guḍa* and *śarkara*, but no liquor. A little later in the same chapter¹⁶ the list reads: *ksīrodakājya-dadhi-mādhura-lāvaṇekṣusārāmṛtam* (*ikṣusāra* could be a misprint for *ikṣurasa*). However, *ikṣusāra* is molasses, raw sugar, i.e. the same as *guḍa*. Here *ikṣusāra* and *mādhura* replace the *guḍa* and *śarkarā* from the earlier verses (287. 6 and 7). *Mādhura* is glossed by Āpte as the flower of the *mallikā* creeper (*Jasminum sambac*). This does not make much sense here – I suspect we should actually read either *madhura*, red sugar cane or molasses, same as *guḍa*, or maybe even *madhūka*, in other words the familiar spirit made of *mahuā* blossoms which I’ll discuss later. Agrawala says that this rite was performed for tradesmen about to undertake or returning from an arduous sea voyage.¹⁷ The *Matsya Purāṇa* contents itself by saying that this ritual, like all costly rituals, increases the wealth of the sacrificer and sends him to “the realm of Viṣṇu” and he “also liberates his sons, wife, father, grandfather etc. from sins and sends them to heaven from hell”¹⁸ – and fattens the Brahmins, the latter of course not said.

Unfortunately, Agrawala doesn’t say how he found out it was tradesmen who performed this sacrifice. It seems a logical conjecture, but it would be interesting to find the source for this information. It is a fact that overseas trade was well established during the Gupta

¹⁵ Agrawala, V.S.: “The Seven-Sea Gift in the Matsya Purāṇa” in *Purāṇa*. Bulletin of the Purāṇa Department. All India Kāśīrāja Trust, Vol. 1, No. 2, Feb. 1960, pp. 206–212.

¹⁶ *Matsyapurāṇa* 287. 12, text rendered in Agrawala 1960, pp. 211–212.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 207.

¹⁸ *Matsyapurāṇa* 287.13–15.

Empire (240–550 A.D.).¹⁹ Agrawala points out the existence of wells used for the purpose in Benares, Allahabad, Mathura, Ujjain and Patna.²⁰ If those wells are still to be found, they are but decaying remnants of long forgotten anxieties.²¹

The Purāṇas were written by Brahmins for Brahmins, so the oceans could easily be relegated to pure fantasy as the above-mentioned lists demonstrate. Brahmins did not sail the oceans. Vaiśyas, kṣatriyas and the lower orders did. When oceans are dealt with realistically, or sort of, it is the dangerous aspects that predominate. The famous example is the *Supārāga jātaka* or *Suppāraka jātaka*²² where one dangerous ocean follows another. But they all contain great treasures, another oceanic fantasy. In the *Supārāga jātaka*²³ we are dealing with oceans for seafarers, waters to be traversed for trading purposes. There are no concentric *dvīpas* here. The ship simply sails into an ocean after another, most of them fraught with danger like the real ocean. However, some idea of concentric circles may be underlying, since the Jātaka oceans end with the word *–māla* or *–mālin*, that is a garland which usually encircles something. The Sanskrit and the Pāli version differ slightly, as seen from the following:

The Jātakamālā oceans:

1. *mahāsamudra* (14.3 ff)

The Pāli canon oceans:

1. *mahāsamudda*

also called *pakatisamudda* = the real/natural ocean

¹⁹ Agrawala *op.cit.* p. 208, Majumdar (ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vol III. *The Classical Age*, Bombay 1954, p. 589 ff.

²⁰ Agrawala, *op. cit.*, p. 208 and Agrawala, V.S.: *Matsya Purāṇa – A Study*, Varanasi 1963, pp. 182, 383–384.

²¹ I visited the Mathura Museum on June 9, 2007. There is indeed a dried-up well 300 feet deep just outside the main museum building, but there is no way of knowing if that was the well used for the *saptasāgaramahādāna*. Two *murtis* were fished up from the well in 1914 and 1915 resp. One is a five-faced Śivaliṅga from the Gupta period (acq. no.15.516) and the other a Kushana Vishnu (acq. no 14.392–395 – it consists of four joined pieces). Neither of these two could possibly have been part of the *saptasāgara* sacrifice, since they are too big to have been put in a bowl. There were no little gold *murtis* found, expectedly.

²² Here I will be referring to the Sanskrit text in Aryaśūra: *Jātakamālā*, Varanasi 1994, pp. 188–202, and to the Pāli text in *The Jātaka*, ed. V. Fausboll, Vol. IV, London 1963, pp. 136–143.

²³ For illustration of this Jātaka see www.borobudur.tv/jataka_014.htm.

2. <i>khuramālisamudra</i> (14.13)	2. <i>khuramāla samudda</i>
3. <i>kṣīrārṇava</i> called <i>dadhimālin</i> (14.15)	3. <i>aggimāla/aggimālī</i>
4. <i>agnimālisamudra</i> (14.17)	4. <i>dadhimāla/mālī</i>
5. <i>kuśamālisamudra</i> (14.19)	5. <i>nīlavaṇṇakusamāla kusamāla/mālī</i>
6. <i>nalāmālisāgara</i> (14.21)	6. <i>nalāmāla</i>
7. <i>vaḍavāmukhasamudra</i> (14.31)	7. <i>vaḷabhāmukhasamudda</i>

The story goes as follows: Supāraga/Suppāraka, who of course is the Buddha in an earlier incarnation, is an excellent navigator, although old and blind. He is urged to come aboard a ship by the tradesmen of a city called Bharukaccha. They think that his mere presence on board will bring luck and guarantee success. They sail from one terrifying ocean to another, but with Supāraga, the Bodhisattva, on board it all ends well.

These oceans, full of silver, gold and gems, are very different from the purāṇic ones and seem to belong to an entirely different tradition: one where the ocean was feared. The troubles start immediately: the merchants traverse the *mahāsāgara*, the ordinary saltwater ocean, which the Pāli version calls the *pakatisamudda*, i.e. the real ordinary salt water ocean, encounter storms, hissing serpents, and all kinds of dangers. They spend some four months at sea. And it gets worse: after the *mahāsāgara* they then sail into the *khuramāli samudra*, Pāli *khūramāla-samuddam* where fish looking like men (or *vice versa*) with razor-pointed noses dive up and down:

āmukta-rūpya-kavacā iva daitya-yodhā ghorekṣaṇāḥ khura-nikāśa-virūpa-ghoṇāḥ / unmajjanāvatarāṇa-sphuraṇa-prasaṅgāt krīḍāṃ ivārṇavajale 'nubhavanti ke 'pi //

Surprisingly, Speyer²⁴ translates *khura-nikāśa-virūpa-ghoṇāḥ* as “ugly noses that resemble a quadruped’s hoof” when it is more likely that these creatures have noses that are like razors, Sanskrit *kṣura*, here prakṛitized to *khura*.²⁵

²⁴ *Jātakamālā* 14.12–13, Speyer tr, (see bibliography) p.128.

²⁵ See Āpte *Dict.* p. 640. Thanks to Prof. Renate Soehnen-Thieme for drawing my attention to this.

The Pāli text reads: *ummujjanti nimujjanti manussā khuranāsikā* “men with razor-pointed noses dive up and down.”²⁶ It is likely that the seafarers are seeing either dolphins or sharks.

After the razor-garland ocean they reach the milk ocean, *kṣīrārṇava*, also called the *dadhimālī* ocean,²⁷ which in the *Jātakamālā* is followed by the *agnimālī samudra*.²⁸ The Pāli order is inverted: first *aggimālī*, then *dadhimālī* (see list above). The interesting thing here is that there is no difference between milk and curd, the milk ocean simply gets a garland of curd!

Then they reach an ocean garlanded with *kuśa* grass, the *kuśamālī samudra* the *nīlavaṇṇakusamāla* in the Pāli version,²⁹ then a mysterious *nalāmālī sāgara*, Pāli *nalāmāla samudda*,³⁰ both further discussed below.

Finally they reach the most terrifying ocean of them all, where the so called submarine fire resides, the *vaḍavāmukha samudra*, Pāli *vaḷabhā-mukhasamudda*.³¹ The Sanskrit/Pāli word literally means the mouth of the mare. The deceptively similar, maybe even cognate Swedish word *mareld* is defined as “the light given out from small florescent marine animals.”³² The submarine fire sometimes seen off the West coast of Sweden is described as

...Noctiluca scintillans and it is a single-celled animal 1–2 millimeter long belonging to the plankton group dinoflagellata. ... It lives all along the Swedish west coast and many other places in the world. But Noctiluca is not the only shining star neither in Swedish waters nor in foreign waters. In Sweden alone there are at least 35 [animals] related to *Noctiluca* that also can glow. Moreover, there are small crayfish (jumping crayfish) which [also] can get the sea to glow at night. ...The light is caused by a chemical process called bioluminescence. When *Noctiluca* is disturbed the chemical balance inside the animal

²⁶ Fausboll *Jātaka* Vol. IV, p. 139.

²⁷ *Jātakamālā* 14.12–13.

²⁸ *Jātakamālā* 14.15.

²⁹ *Jātakamālā* 14.19, Fausboll p. 140, l.16.

³⁰ *Jātakamālā* 14.21, Fausboll pp. 140–141.

³¹ *Jātakamālā* 14.31, Fausboll pp. 141–142.

³² *Illustrerad Svensk Ordbok*, Stockholm 1955, p. 933.

changes so that two substances, luciferin and luciferas react to each other. An effective reaction gives light, but no warmth.³³

The submarine fire could be some kind of firefly squid, *Watasenia scintillans*,³⁴ found in the Western Pacific Ocean. This depends on how far around the Pacific the ancient Indian merchants sailed. However, it is a fact that submarine bioluminescence exists. The remaining mystery is why this is called *vaḍavāmukha*.³⁵ What does a mare have to do with the natural phenomenon of submarine fire? The seafarers actually do not reach this ocean in the *Jātakamālā*, and beat a hasty retreat from it in the Pāli version.

What are the significant traits of these Buddhist oceans, apart the fact that they are dangerous to traverse? All, except the first, the ordinary salt water ocean and the last, the dangerous mare-mouth ocean, contain jewels, silver and gold, and they all invoke a specific colour which is likely to reflect the colours of gems: *khuramālī* has diamonds, presumably because of the greyish-white colour of the dolphins or sharks, that *agnimālī* has gold, the *dadhimālī* silver.

The jewels of the *kuśamālī* ocean are more problematic. The Pāli version says *tasmin pana samudde nīlamanīratanaṃ ussannaṃ ahosi*, reinforced by the term *nīlavaṇṇakusamāla nāma samuddaṃ*³⁶ which seems to indicate sapphires. However, the Pāli Text Society translation settles for emeralds, not sapphires.³⁷ This is probably founded on the fact that *kuśa* grass is green, not blue. However, there is no real distinction between green and blue in Sanskrit, which makes it very difficult to know whether an emerald or a sapphire is intended.³⁸ So that must be true for Pāli also.

In the Sanskrit version Speyer translates *pariṇata-kuśa-parṇa-varṇa-toyaḥ salila-nidhiḥ katamo nv ayaṃ vibhāti / sukusuma iva*

³³ *Uppslagsbok för alla*, Stockholm 1910, translation mine. My thanks to Colonel Per-Arne Persson of the Swedish Armed Forces for this information.

³⁴ See www.seasky.org/monsters/sea7a1o.html.

³⁵ The *vaḍavāmukha samudra* is also mentioned in *Mbh.* 12.290.68.

³⁶ Fausboll IV, p. 140.

³⁷ *Jātaka* translation IV, p. 89.

³⁸ See Filliozat, Jean; Classement des couleurs et des lumières en sanskrit. *Bulletin de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, IV section, Paris 1955, and Sandahl-Forgue, Stella: "Les couleurs des sentiments" pp. 144–154 in *Le Gītagovinda. Tradition et innovation dans le kāvya*, Stockholm 1977.

phena-bhakti-citrair anilajavākalitais taraṅgabhaṅgaiḥ // as “Which of the seas now appear to us? Its waters have the colour of the blades of ripe kuśa-grass. The breaking of its wind-stirred billows crowns it a many-coloured foam-ornament, and makes it look as if it were overspread with flowers.”³⁹ There is no real mention of jewels at all in the *Jātakamālā*, but one must assume that ripe, uncut kuśa grass is green, and the ocean is rather likely blue.

Then the merchants approach the sixth sea: *vaṃśarāga-vaidūrya-prabha-vyatikara-harita-salilam aparṃ samudram ālokya* rendered by Speyer as “perceiving another sea, the water of which had a greenish colour like that proceeding from the united brilliancy of emeralds and beryls.”⁴⁰ The rendering of *vaṃśarāga* as ‘emerald’ comes from the following śloka:

*marakata-harita-prabhair jalair vahati navām iva śādvāla-śriyam /
kumuda-rucira-phena-bhūṣaṇaḥ salila-nidhiḥ katamo 'yam īkṣyate
//...nalamāly eṣa sāgaraḥ*⁴¹ //

“The sea we now behold has yet another appearance. Its waters have a green shine of emeralds and resemble a splendid meadow; they are adorned with foam as lovely as waterlilies. Which sea is this again? ... This is the Nalamālī ocean.”⁴²

The Pāli version is much more problematic: *nāvā... nalavanam viya ca veḷuvanam viya ca khāyamānam Nalamālam nāma samuddam pāpuni* – “the ship came to a sea called Nalamāla, which had the aspect of an expanse of reeds or a grove of bamboos.”⁴³ *Nala* means some kind of reed, maybe bamboo. But the commentary insists it has to be some kind of reddish reed: *nalo ti vicchikanalo kakkaṭānalopi so rattavaṇṇo hoti, veḷu ti pavālass' etaṃ nāmaṃ, so samuddo pavālussanno rattobhaso ahosi* – “Nala is scorpion-reed or crab-reed”⁴⁴ [which are] red in colour. *Veḷu* is the name for coral (*pavāḷa*), this ocean was red like coral.”⁴⁵

³⁹ *Jātakamālā* 14, 18, Speyer translation p. 130.

⁴⁰ *Jātakamālā* 14, p. 196, *Jātakamālā* tr. p.130.

⁴¹ *ibid.* 14. 20-21.

⁴² *Jātakamālā* tr. p. 130.

⁴³ Fausboll IV, p.140, tr. IV, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Must refer to a cooked crab, since uncooked crabs are greyish.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 141, translation mine.

The description of this ocean concludes with *tasmim̐ pana samudde vaṃsarāgaveḷuriyam ussannam*⁴⁶ i.e. an ocean full of *vaṃsarāga* and *veḷuriya*. *Vaṃsarāga* is found in the PTS Dictionary and glossed as ‘the colour of bamboo, a term for the *veḷuriya* gem’, but not in any Sanskrit dictionary, which seems to indicate that the *Jātakamālā* is based on the Pāli *jātaka*, not the other way around. But the PTS Dictionary defines *veḷuriya* as lapis lazuli, which decidedly is blue, not at all the colour of bamboo. But scorpions and crabs can under no circumstances be blue (see note 41), so we must believe the commentator that we are talking about coral, i.e. we are dealing with a red colour. To add to the confusion *veḷuriya* is probably the same as Skt. *vaiḍurya*, i.e. cat’s eye, a chrysoberyl, which is yellowish, not at all lapis lazuli. Here again we have a confusion of colours: red and yellow are often confused, just as blue and green are.⁴⁷

Whatever kinds of gem were found in these Buddhist oceans, they all represent wealth and seem to reflect a mercantile culture far away from the brahminical purāṇic fantasies which mainly cater to gourmandise or gluttony. However, the gold and silver statuettes and the gems that went into the bowls in the *saptasāgaramahādāna*⁴⁸ bridge the two cultures, and both castes get their due.

In later Sanskrit literature the seven oceans are merely a poetic convention. As such we meet all seven of them in the *Naiṣadhīyacarita*. They appear in *sarga* XI during Damayantī’s *svayamvara*. Different candidates are pointed out to Damayantī by Sarasvatī. Among them are the kings of the seven *dvīpas* which the oceans surround, so both the islands and the oceans are mentioned. First comes the sweet-watered ocean in XI.27: *svādūke jalanidhau savanena sārddham bhāvyā bhavantu tava vāri-vihāra-līlāḥ*, translated by K.K. Handiqui as “let the joys of thy water-sports with king Savana prove charming in the sweet-watered ocean” with the curious, and entirely wrong, foot-note saying “the ‘sweet-watered ocean’, i.e. the ocean of milk.”^{49/50} The milk-ocean (*kṣīrārṇava*) appears in

⁴⁶ Fausboll IV.141.

⁴⁷ See note 32 above.

⁴⁸ It would be interesting to know which gems went into which bowl, but, unfortunately, the *Matsyapurāṇa* doesn’t say.

⁴⁹ Handiqui p. 160.

⁵⁰ See earlier discussion of this ocean.

XI.40: *kṣīrārṇavas tava katākṣa-ruci-cchaṭānām anvetu tatra vikaṭāyitam āyatākṣi*, rendered as “long-eyed one, there let the ocean of milk imitate the play of the beams of lustre issuing from thy glances...”⁵¹ In the following verse (XI.41) it is made clear that Viṣṇu, here called Madhu-bhid, lives there.

The third ocean is the *dadhimaṇḍa*, usually rendered as the butter-milk ocean. In the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* we find *dadhi-maṇḍa-payodhi-pūraḥ* “the lake from the *dadhimaṇḍa* ocean” (XI.49). The commentator Nārāyaṇa explains *dadhimaṇḍa* as *marīca-śarkarādi-miśraṃ mastu iti*, i.e. sour cream or whey (*mastu*), mixed with pepper (*marīca*) and sugar (*śarkara*). What *ādi* (etc.) stands for one can only guess. Handiqui cleverly translates *dadhimaṇḍa* as the “Ocean of Spiced Curds.”⁵² A.N. Jani⁵³ renders *marīca* as red pepper, which is misleading, since red pepper usually means chilli pepper which had not reached India at the time the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* was composed.

The fourth ocean in XI.53 is the regular *dadhi-mahodahi*, the Ocean of Curds, and the fifth in XI.58 is the ghī ocean, *ghṛtoda-taṭīṣu* “on the banks of the clarified butter ocean.” Then the liquor or wine ocean is mentioned in XI.67 *dvīpasya śālmala iti prathitasya nāthaḥ / pāthodinā valayitasya surāmbunāyam //* – “He is the lord of the famous island called Śālmala, encircled by an ocean whose water is wine (*surā*); and finally the sugarcane juice ocean is mentioned in XI.75: *pītvā tavādhara-sudhāṃ vasudhā-sudhāṃśur na śraddadhātu rasam iṅṣu-rasoda-vārām* “having drunk the nectar of your lips the moon of the earth will not take to the juice of the waters of the sugarcane juice ocean.”⁵⁴

Curiously absent is the ordinary salt water ocean. This in itself proves the point that the seven oceans are pure fantasy meant to conjure up something pleasant and enjoyable as in the Swedish drinking song.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 162.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 164.

⁵³ Jani p. 216.

⁵⁴ There are, of course, many other instances where the seven oceans are mentioned in the vast Sanskrit literature. These are just a few examples, not an exhaustive list.

The final set of particularly interesting oceans to be found in the 16th century Avadhī poem *Padumāvat* by Mālik Muhammad Jāsyāsī.⁵⁵ The story is about king Ratan Sen of Chittaur, who, in the guise of a yogi in quest of love and beauty, sets out to Sinhaladvīpa to win princess Padmāvatī, here called Padumāvat. Jāsyāsī's oceans follow the purāṇic ones very closely. Just as Kirfel's third group, Jāsyāsī does not mention an *ikṣurasa*, sugarcane juice ocean, although sugarcane would most likely have been grown in Avadh in his time. This seems to indicate that he follows either the *Mahābhārata* or the *Padmapurāṇa*, but he adds in a seventh ocean to make the magic number seven. Maybe as a Muslim he also knows about Sinbad the Sailor and the seven oceans in the Islamic narrative tradition. As in the *Supāraga jātaka*, there are no *dvipas* separating the oceans, they just follow one after the other: *mile samuṇḍa vai sātaṇ behara behara nīra* (PA 150.8b) – “the seven oceans meet, [but] with separate waters.” These oceans are very different from the ones described in the *Supāragajātaka*, but also very unlike the dry purāṇic lists. Jāsyāsī describes each and every ocean, tying the description of the oceans into Ratan Sen's arduous and burning quest. Jāsyāsī's oceans are as follows:

1. *khāra samuṇḍa* – the salt water ocean
2. *khīra samuṇḍa* – the milk ocean
3. *dadhi samuṇḍa* – the curd ocean
4. *udadhi samuṇḍa* – the ghee ocean
5. *surā samuṇḍa* – the liquor ocean
6. *kilakila samuṇḍa* ?
7. *mānasara samuṇḍa* – the Mānasarovar ocean, i.e. the pure water ocean

The party sets out sailing the *khāra samuṇḍa*. Like *Supāraga*, Ratan Sen's truthfulness guarantee that they hold out against storms with enormous waves, crocodiles and turtles.⁵⁶ They then reach the milk ocean, which is – expectedly – white and contains pearls, rubies and

⁵⁵ There are several editions of this text. All my ref. are to V.S. Agrawala's edition – see bibliography. I have also used Mātā Prasād Gupta's edition for comparisons. There is only one English translation of this text: Shirreff, A.G.: *Padmāvatī*, Calcutta 1944, which predates both Agrawala's and Gupta's editions. It is based on Grierson's and Shukla's editions. I will use the abbreviation PA for the Agrawala ed. and Sh. for Shirreff's translation.

⁵⁶ PA. 150.1–6.

diamonds,⁵⁷ followed by the *dadhi samuṇḍa*. The first three do not require any explanation, but the remaining ones cry out for one. *udadhi samuṇḍa* cannot mean “the ocean ocean” or “the sea of ocean” as V.S. Agrawala, Mātā Prasād Gupta and Shirreff all interpret it,⁵⁸ since that doesn’t make sense. Let’s first note that from milk we get curd, and the previous stanza seems to imply that the milk was first boiled before it was set to become curd. The curd is then churned to give butter, which in turn gives ghee. This is exactly what happens: *udadhi samuṇḍa* means the *ghṛta* ocean. Neither Agrawal nor Mātā Prasād Gupta, these two eminent Hindī scholars, make the slightest comment about the “ocean ocean”, they just repeat the text’s *udadhi samuṇḍa/samudra*, and Shirreff, with some bewilderment and in total rejection of common sense calls it “the sea of ocean.”⁵⁹ It is possible that Shirreff understands *udadhi samuṇḍa* to mean the fresh water ocean, *jala samuṇḍa*.

The word *udadhi* is used a relatively limited number of times in the *Padmāvat*.⁶⁰ Mathur has only two examples of *udadhi*: In the first example PA 583. 4 *udadhi* surely means “ocean”: *būrati haum dukha udadhi gaṃbhīra*⁶¹ – “I am drowning in the deep ocean of grief”, but in the second *udadhi* is part of an enumeration of the seven oceans: *khāra khāra dadhi udadhi surājala puni kilakilā akūta / ko caṛhi bāṃdhai samuṇḍa ye sātaum hai kākara asa būta //*.⁶² It is worth noting that the seventh, the Mānasarovar ocean is omitted here, despite the number seven spelt out. I have found one more example where *udadhi* must mean ‘ocean’: *kayā udadhi citavaum piya pāhām* – “In the ocean of [my] body I see [my] beloved near”⁶³ but in *udadhi*

⁵⁷ PA. 151.1–2.

⁵⁸ PA 153, M.P. Gupta 153. Shirreff 15.4.

⁵⁹ Sh.15.4.1, see also Sh.13.2.8.

⁶⁰ I have drawn on Mathur, Ramesh: *Padmāvata. An Etymological Study*, Delhi 1974, as much as possible. Mathur’s *Index Verborum*, which refers to Agrawala’s edition, useful as it is, is unfortunately incomplete, which may be explained by the fact that it was compiled before the computer age. So there may be some *udadhi* I have missed, although I have added four more instances to Mathur’s list: PA 401.1, 516.5, 522.2 and, of course, in the chapter under consideration, PA chap. 15 *sāta samudra khaṇḍa* stanzas 150–158, esp. PA153, which is not listed in Mathur’s index.

⁶¹ PA.583.4=Sh. 48.3.4. However, Shirreff has another reading here.

⁶² PA.141.8=Sh. 13.2.8.

⁶³ PA 401.1.

*samuṇḍa jeṽṽ laharaiṁ*⁶⁴ it is not clear what *udadhi* actually stands for. This is corroborated with another example: *duaṁ samuṇḍa dadhi udadhi apāra*, which Shirreff translates as: “They were like the two boundless oceans of milk and of water.”⁶⁵ In both these examples the *udadhi* refers to the armies. In PA 522.2 Alauddin Shah’s army is described, in PA 516.5 the two armies, Ratan Sen’s and Alauddin Shah’s. If my contention is right that *udadhi* actually means ghee, then these examples would allude to the colour of the soldier’s garments, which would imply that Alauddin’s soldier wore something yellowish and Ratan Sen’s pure white.

To prove that *udadhi* can mean ghee, let’s return to the description of the *udadhi samuṇḍa* in PA 153. We first meet with the image of burning: *āe udadhi samuṇḍa apārāṁ / dharatī saraga jarai tehi jhārāṁ* – “They reached the boundless/shoreless *udadhi samudra*. Its flame/heat burns [both] earth and heaven.”⁶⁶ This is followed by *āgi jo upanī ohi samundā / laṅkā jarī oi eka bunda //* – “from that ocean fire arose – one [single] drop of it could burn Lanka.”⁶⁷ Thereafter the stanza resumes the theme of the narrative, namely Ratan Sen’s separation from his beloved, which of course also is a burning experience, the fire of separation,⁶⁸ and then the concluding *dohā* says: *talaphai tela karāha jimi imi talaphai tehi nīra* – “as oil bubbles in the frying pan, in the same way the water of it [i.e. the *udadhi samuṇḍa*] bubbled.”⁶⁹ This is a very down-to-earth and accurate picture of the actual melting or lightly frying of butter, which is extracted from curd, to separate the frothy impurities, i.e. the bubbles so that ghee is obtained. Jayasī himself says in the previous stanza about the *dadhi samuṇḍa* that *ghī* is extracted from *dadhi*: *dahī māhiṁ mathi kārai ghīu* – “having churned the curd, ghee is extracted.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, the normal words for fresh water in

⁶⁴ PA 522.2=Sh. 43.7.2.

⁶⁵ PA 516.5=Sh. 43.1.5.

⁶⁶ PA 153.1=S 15.4.1.

⁶⁷ PA 153.2=S.15.4.2.

⁶⁸ *Biraha kai jhārā* PA 153.5.

⁶⁹ PA 153.8.

⁷⁰ PA 152.2.

Padumāvat are *jala*, *nīra* and *pānī*, not *udadhi*.⁷¹ Why, then, would fresh water be called *udadhi* here?

My next contention is that *udadhi* here actually stands for a hypothetical **avadadhi* which would mean something like ‘coming out of *dadhi*’. **Avadadhi* can become *udadhi* via *audadhi*. *Au* is undoubtedly a long vowel, but, as similar cases mentioned in Pischel⁷² show, a long vowel, in this case *au* can be abbreviated before a stressed syllable, and the stress in the word *udadhi* would fall on the second syllable */da/* distinguishing it from the *udadhi* meaning ‘ocean’, where the stress would normally fall on the first syllable */u/*. So phonetically it is possible for **avadadhi* to become *udadhi*. A further example of *ava-* transforming into a short */u/* is Hindi *utarnā* ‘descend’ from *ava+TR*.

The patent disadvantage of this interpretation is that nowhere is a word **avadadhi* found as such, much less meaning ghee. It could, however, be an invention of Jāyasī who is very fond of punning. By interpreting *udadhi samuṇḍa* to mean the clarified butter ocean, the stanza has the advantage of making sense.

From this ocean Ratan Sen proceeds to the *surā samuṇḍa*, which Shirreff of course translates as ‘wine ocean’, and Agrawala and Gupta just leave as *surā samuṇḍa*. This stanza at least proves – as if that was necessary – that *surā* means liquor, not wine. Jayasi makes that crystal clear: *surā samuṇḍa puni rājā āvā / mahuā mad chāta dekharāvā //* – “The king came to the liquor ocean, it looked like an intoxicating cover of *mahuā* flowers.”⁷³

Both Agrawala and Gupta translate *mahuā* as *mahue ke phūl*, i.e. the *mahuā* flowers which are still collected, fermented and distilled to make country liquor. Mahua liquor is very likely the kind of liquor Jāyasī would know about, since the tree grows all over the region

⁷¹ See Mathur’s *Padumāvat* word index, p. 66, 107 and 118.

⁷² Pischel, Richard: *Comparative grammar of the Prākṛt languages*, Delhi 1965, § 81, p. 75.

⁷³ PA 154.1. My translation follows Agrawal and Gupta, Shirriff 15.5 has a slightly different interpretation.

where he lived, namely Avadh.⁷⁴ The tree in question is *Bassia latifolia*. It is a tall, wide tree with large flowers which grows all over India up to an altitude of 4,000 feet.⁷⁵ That the *surā samuṇḍa* here means a distilled liquor, not wine made from grapes is further corroborated by the word *potī* in PA154.6. *Potī*, (or *potā* in the text used by Shirreff) “is the technical term for a water-cooling jacket used in distilling.”⁷⁶ The word *mahuā* occurs several times in *Padumāvat*,⁷⁷ but so does the word *dākha* ‘grapes,’⁷⁸ of particular interest is the line: *tajai dākha mahuā rasa cākhā* (PA 429.5) – “having abandoned the grapes [or wine] he tasted the mahuā [spirit].”

It is not likely that wine was made from grapes in Jāyasī’s days. First, grapes do not grow in Avadh, which seems to be the only country Jāyasī actually knew,⁷⁹ and even if grapes were known, it is not sure wine was made, nor that they were distilled.⁸⁰ So we can probably assume that Jāyasī’s *surā samuṇḍa* is an ocean of *mahuā* spirit.

From the *surā* ocean Ratan Sen proceeds to the sixth ocean, the *kilakila samuṇḍa*, which gets two full stanzas.⁸¹ This is a terrifying sea with waves high as mountains whirling around like a potter’s wheel. In the middle of this ocean there is a path dividing it “like the blade of a sword” *khāmḍai kai asi dhāra ninārā* (PA 156.5). This path stretches for thirty thousand leagues *tīsa sahasra kosa kai pāṭā* (PA 156.6), but is so narrow that an ant cannot walk on it: *asa sāmkar cali sakai na cāmṭā* (PA 156.6). It is sharper than a sword, and thinner than a hair: *khāmḍai cāhi paini paināi / bāra cāhi pātari patarāi* (PA 156.7). The Kilakila ocean is the final test, here is the path of life and

⁷⁴ “In Oudh, four gallons of mahwa spirit, between 25° and 30°, can be made for Rs. 1.13, and from gur for Rs. 5 and 1/2.” Balfour, Edward: *The Cyclopaedia of India*, Vol. 2, p. 796.

⁷⁵ Watts, George: *The Commercial Products of India*, pp. 116–117. Cf. Balfour, Edward: *The Cyclopaedia of India*, Vol. 1, pp. 289–290.

⁷⁶ Shirreff tr. p. 102, note (i).

⁷⁷ PA 28.5; 201.5,6; 429.5 (from Mathur’s *Padumāvat* word index).

⁷⁸ PA 34.4; 546.4; 553.5 (from Mathur’s *Padumāvat* word index). I have found four more instances: PA 154.4; 429.5; 436.3; 439.3. There may be others.

⁷⁹ See Shirreff, A.G.: *Padmāvatī*, Calcutta 1944, p. vii.

⁸⁰ See above notes 9 and 10.

⁸¹ PA 155, 156 = Sh. 15.6, 7.

death, of hope and despair: *marana jiana ehī paṁth ehī āsa nirāsa / parā so gayā patārahi tirā so gā kabilāsa //* – “Death and life are on this path: on it are hope and despair. He who falls goes to hell: he who gets across goes to paradise.”⁸²

This Jayasī’s sixth ocean is clearly not a purāṇic one. Its terrifying nature is closer to the oceans described in the *Supārāga jātaka*. Not even by the wildest stretch of imagination can it be made to correspond to the one missing purāṇic ocean, the *ikṣurasa*, the sugarcane ocean. Why Jāyasī has left out the sugarcane ocean is not known, nor are there any Sanskrit or Pāli sources that can explain the *Kilakila* ocean. The word exists in Sanskrit, and it means a ‘cry of joy’ which certainly doesn’t fit the context here. It is actually used in the *Padumāvat* once in that sense.⁸³ Is it possible that we should read *kalakala*, usually glossed as ‘indistinct or confused noise’, but seems to also mean ‘uproar, tumult’⁸⁴ here instead of *kilakila*? This is possible, especially if we assume that Jāyasī originally used the Persian script.⁸⁵

The description of the mighty waves corresponds to similar descriptions of the sea in storm found in the *Daśakumāracarita*, the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, and many other places and the imagery is commonplace. The only thing that matters here is that this is the most dangerous ocean of them all, before they finally reach the last and seventh ocean, the *mānasara samuṁda*. It seems obvious to me that this is the ocean which corresponds to the purāṇic pure/sweet water ocean. The fresh water used in the *saptasāgaramahādāna* is water from a holy place, *tīrthavāri*. And what can be holier than the *Mānasa sarovara*? It may seem odd that Jāyasī chooses the famous lake in the Himalayas to be the last ocean to cross before the ships reach Sinhaladvīpa, but Jāyasī the poet is not bothered by geographical exactitude: his *Mānasarodaka* is located in Singhaladvīpa! It is first mentioned in the *Siṁhala dvīpa varṇana khaṇḍa*,⁸⁶ and further on receives a full chapter of its own, the *Mānasarodaka khaṇḍa*⁸⁷ where

⁸² PA 156.9 = Sh. 15.7.

⁸³ PA 638.6 = Sh. 54.1.

⁸⁴ This seems to be the meaning in *Mṛcch*. 2nd act p. 94 in the Kale ed.

⁸⁵ This is discussed in Shirreff, A.G.: *Padmāvatī*, Calcutta 1944, p. v.

⁸⁶ PA 31. = Sh.2.7. The whole description of Sinhaladvīpa has 25 stanzas: PA 25–49 = Sh. 2.1–25.

⁸⁷ PA59–65 = Sh. 4.1–8.

Padmāvatī and her friends go to swim and frolick. In the *Sāta sumudra khaṇḍa* Jāyasī simply wants to suggest that the dangers are over and king Ratan Sen is sailing into a sea of bliss. So the choice of *Mānasa sarovara* to represent fresh water is a logical one, in a poetic sense at least. The water from this lake must indeed be *tīrthavāri par excellence*.

These examples portray very different pictures of oceans from the brahminical fantasy about the good things in life to the dangerous oceans Supāraga leads his crew through in search of fabulous wealth, and finally the oceans king Ratan Sen as a penitent yogī has to traverse to win his Padmāvatī. Both Supāraga and Ratan Sen achieve their goals due to their truthfulness and purity of mind.

And whilst this paper was delivered all the rivers of Scotland became Scottish ale and the sea had turned into whisky. Talk about purity of purpose!

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