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Introduction

The *Carakasamhitā*, the most famous among the Indian medical classics, is also the most complex one as to its internal structure. The treatise is commonly regarded as three-layered, consisting of an ancient core, referred to as the *Agniveśatantra*, a second stratum regarded as deriving from an author traditionally called Caraka, and a third and final version due to Dṛḍhabala.

A number of authors have, with much labour and ingenuity, tried to find criteria that differentiate these layers and to attribute particular parts to one of the three. None of these attempts is convincing, flawed as they are by presuppositions unsupported by evidence.¹

An exception has to be made for an important part of Dṛḍhabala's contributions, for it is known which chapters he added to a fragmentarily preserved text christened by him for the first time as the *Carakasamhitā*.² The extent to which he revised the whole of this *Carakasamhitā* is a matter of dispute.³

Instead of taking as one's focus the disentanglement of the chronological layers, I think it more rewarding to regard the text of the *Carakasamhitā* as a product of Dṛḍhabala and to scrutinize its contents with a view to its inner coherence or lack of it. This approach, less common, may result in detecting parts not fitting into the general framework, thus eliciting questions about their origin, relative date and the reasons for their incorporation.

My study on the *Moringa* trees⁴ made me aware of peculiarities of chapter four of the *Sūtrasthāna* of the *Carakasamhitā*, especially of the remarkable character of the list of decades of drugs with a specific action. The plants constituting a particular group of ten, in my previous study the *śirovirecana* group, turned out to be a small section of all those employed for this purpose, and one of them was even never used in practice.

Several of the decades will have to be closely examined in special monographs for the purpose of settling their position and meaning within the struc-

¹ See G. Jan Meulenbeld (1999): IA, 94–95 (Contributions of Agniveśa), 95 (Contributions of Caraka).

² See G. Jan Meulenbeld (1999): IA, 130–133.

³ See G. Jan Meulenbeld (1999): IA, 130–141 (Dṛḍhabala).

⁴ See Jan Meulenbeld (2009).

ture of the whole treatise. This requirement applies the more to the list of decades in general. The drug actions it refers to attract the attention by being independent of the doctrine of the three *doṣas*. They are also conspicuous in not being exclusively directed at major diseases.

Chapter four of Caraka's *Sūtrasthāna* fails to elucidate the nature of the drug actions in theoretical terms. The properties of medicinal substances leading to particular effects have not yet been discussed in a preceding chapter and will be dealt with much later in chapter twenty-six. The only exception is *Sūtrasthāna* 1.66, where the relations between the tastes and the *doṣas* are dealt with. The way in which a particular substance may directly influence the course of a disease or be suitable to a specific form of treatment remains completely obscure. This question does not arise for the first time with respect to chapter four. Chapter one (1.74–86ab) has already lists of plants, called *mūlinī* (having useful roots) and *phalinī* (having useful fruits), especially advantageous on account of their emetic, purgative and other properties. The problem becomes more acute in chapter four with its wide range of actions.

The commentators Cakrapāṇidatta and Śivadāsaśena are for some reason silent. Gaṅgādhara, however, thought it worthwhile to reflect on the issue. He ascribes the drug actions of chapter four to *prabhāva*, a specific action that is not the effect of the taste (*rasa*), post-digestive taste (*vipāka*) or potency (*vīrya*) of a drug. One cannot but agree with him since āyurvedic theory does not offer another alternative.⁵

These considerations on chapter four of the *Sūtrasthāna* of the *Carakasamhitā* lead to an observation of general import: the text as it has been transmitted shows a gap between theory and practice. Bernard Williams has expressed this with regard to the development of Greek thought: "it is important to remember the gap that always exists between intelligent practice and the theoretical reflective understanding of that practice".⁶ This general remark has to be specified in our case. The contents of the *Carakasamhitā* demonstrate that the practices described in it disagree with the theories expounded or cannot be understood by means of its theoretical concepts.

⁵The concept of *prabhāva* is defined at Ca.Sū.26.67. See also on *prabhāva*: G. Jan Meulenbeld (1987), 14–17.

⁶Bernard Williams (2006), 26.