

Barlaam and Josaphat: Buddhist Narratives in Islam and Christianity

This version: October 14th, 2017

Latest version: <http://docs.filologi.no/barlaam.pdf>

*A collaborative project involving researchers from the **University of Oslo** (Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas; Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies; Faculty of Theology), the **University of Bergen** (Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies), **Malmö University** (Caucasus Studies), **Cambridge University** (Faculty of Classics), **Freie Universität Berlin** (Seminar for Semitic and Arabic Studies), **University of Zurich** (Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies), **University of Gothenburg** (Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion), the **Norwegian School of Theology** – coordinated by the **Norwegian Institute of Philology (PHI)**.*

Project website: www.barlaam.org

Coordinating institution: www.philology.no

Text: www.polyglotta.no/barlaam

Keywords: philology, digital humanities, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, history of religions, medieval literature, narrative motifs, art history, ...

1. Synopsis

This project studies the earliest cross-cultural transmission, from India through the Middle East to Europe, of one of the most popular literary works in medieval European literature and art: the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat – the story of an Indian pagan prince who becomes a Christian prophet.

In the Middle Ages the Greek text and its translations was read as a true hagiographical account of the success of Christian proselytization in India, written by St. John of Damascus (8th century AD). But the legend is, in fact, almost identical to the story of the life of the Buddha known from Buddhist literature. Modern research has established that the text was not originally composed in Greek, but must have been transmitted as a work of fiction to the West. The oldest text is an Arabic version possibly based on earlier sources, which was Christianized in a Georgian version, from which a Greek translation was made in the early 11th century.

The two main objectives of the project are: (1) to establish a multilingual comparative digital edition of the earliest versions of the text, including related artistic representations; (2) to investigate the origins of the narrative, its transmission and

transformation into a Christian legend, through a comparative historical and philological analysis of the Arabic, Georgian and Greek texts, both against the Indian Buddhist background and within the cultures where the Barlaam and Josaphat texts were written and read. An extended goal of the project is to maintain and expand a digital database and website which will serve as an international 'hub' of Barlaam and Josaphat studies, inviting scholars and the public to participate with their own texts and ideas.

The many versions of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat present us with a rare case of a premodern narrative whose influence spans the three major religious civilizations of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. As a chain of relatively free translations from India to Europe, adapted in each case quite thoroughly to the local religion and culture, the versions of this story provide an ideal case for a comparative study of the development of texts, motifs and concepts across cultural boundaries.

2. The story of Barlaam and Josaphat

The legend of the Christian monk Barlaam and the Indian prince Josaphat was an immensely popular story in Medieval Europe. **It is the story of the long-awaited firstborn son of the king of India, prophesied at birth to be either a mighty king or a great spritual leader. The prophesy leads his father, the king, to lock him up in a palace of pleasure and luxury to shield him from the suffering of the world – lest the knowledge of suffering should lead him to seek religion. But, driven by innate curiosity to explore the world, the prince escapes and eventually realizes that the world is full of suffering, disease and death. He finds the truth in religion and becomes a prophet.** This narrative is, in both general outline and in many of its details, very similar to stories from the Buddhist *Vinaya* and in the Mahāyāna version of the *Lalitavistara*, depicting the life of the Buddha. This fact, however, was not known in Medieval Europe, even though the earliest Arabic (and clearly monotheistic) versions from the Islamic period seem to recognise, at least vaguely, the Buddhist allusions.

The story was widely disseminated in a number of languages, from Arabic and Georgian in the East, to Greek and Latin in Medieval Europe, and even to Old Norse and Old Swedish in Medieval Scandinavia. The total number of Medieval translations or versions is not known, but it is certainly more than fifty, and possibly over one hundred.¹

1. According to Budge (1923: II.xi), “[m]ore than sixty translations, versions or paraphrases of it have been enumerated”, and many more have since come to the attention of modern scholarship.

In 1446, a Venetian editor of Marco Polo's Travels wrote a comment to Polo's account of the life of the Buddha, as an interpolation in the main text. As far as we know, this is the first time a connection between the life of the Buddha and the story of Barlaam and Josaphat was made:

Questo asomeia alla vita de san Iosafat lo qual fo fiolo del re Avenir de quelle parte de India, e fo convertido alla fé cristiana per lo remito Barlam, secondo chome se legie nella vita e llegendi di santi padri [...]

(Gennari 2010: 214)

“This is like the life of Saint Iosafat who was son of the king Avenir of those parts of Indie, and was converted to the Christian faith by the means of Barlam, according as is read in the life and legend of the holy fathers.”

(Moule & Pelliot 1938: I.410)

General acknowledgement of the identity of the famous medieval Christian tale of the saints Barlaam and Josaphat with the story of the life of the Buddha, was not established until the mid 19th century. It was recognised quite simultaneously, but apparently independently, by Edouard de Laboulaye in his review of Stanislas Julien's *Les Avadânas* (1859), and by Felix Liebrecht in his article “Die Quellen des ‘Barlaam und Josaphat’” (1860).

The earliest version we have is an Arabic text from the 10th century. The Georgian text has been demonstrated to be a translation from an Arabic text closely related to the extant Arabic one. The source of all European versions is the Greek rendering of the Georgian text, by Euthymius of Athos (d. 1028). The Greek version was for a long time believed to be an original composition by John of Damascus (d. 749), but this has now been proven to be incorrect. Both the Arabic and the Greek texts served as bases for numerous translations in the Near East, North Africa and Europe, among which the Latin tradition in its turn served as a base text for a host of translations into European vernacular languages, such as Old Norse (13th century). It was even translated, in 1591, from Latin into Japanese (in Latin script) by Jesuit missionaries.

The bibliography of ancient documents and modern publications relevant to the Barlaam and Josaphat literary complex is vast, and cannot be presented here. Good general overviews are found in Lang 1966 and Almond 1987. References to the most central modern editions and studies will be found in Bräm 1994, Engels 1998, Volk 2006 and 2009, Johansson and Arvidsson 2009, de Blois 2009, Forster 2012, Cordoni 2014, and in the many editions of the various translations and adaptations.

3. The Project

The present project was established by the Norwegian Institute of Philology in 2017, and will continue for many years to come. Different parts of the project will be realized depending on the relevant research funding, institutional collaboration and individual contributions. Go to www.barlaam.org to view the current status.

The Barlaam and Josaphat literary complex presents a number of challenges to the modern scholar. The present project addresses mainly the historical question of the origins and early development of the story, but it will also investigate how narrative motifs change across cultural and religious boundaries. In addition, the major methodological and technological contribution of the project will be a multilingual and comparative digital edition of 5 texts (Arabic, Georgian, Greek, Latin and Old Norse) and related contextual material (including art history), which will be of great utility for researchers who work on versions in other languages or on other problems in the relevant fields (literary studies, religious studies, translation studies, etc).

The project thus conceived has four components (these are further described in the full project description):

1. Establish a **multilingual comparative critical edition** of the Arabic, Georgian, Greek, Latin and Old Norse versions: *The Barlaam and Josaphat Library (BJL)*.
2. Investigate the Indian, Central Asian and Iranian roots of the Arabic text and establish the **intertextual relationship** between the Arabic version and the later Christian versions (Georgian, Greek, etc.).
3. Study a selection of narrative motifs that are represented in all 5 languages and provide an account of **how shared narrative motifs differ and develop** in the different historical, linguistic and religious contexts.
4. Lay the foundation for **an interdisciplinary network, a 'hub', of Barlaam and Josaphat studies**, by editing and expanding the critical edition to include other languages, maintaining a reference website and arranging international conferences and seminars. The Latin and Old Norse versions are to some extent examples of the expansion beyond the core texts. Possible additions currently planned are Old Swedish and Ethiopic. The digital edition is from the very beginning conceived of as open-ended, and the software developed as open access, so that anyone can participate in the network and contribute texts or contextual material. The project will also endeavour to establish a **complete analytic and annotated bibliography** of original texts and modern studies of the Barlaam and Josaphat literary complex.

In times of extended global migration and rapidly changing cultural interaction in many parts of the world, there is an increasing need to redefine our approach to the many 'national' branches of the human intellectual heritage, and instead argue for a truly shared global heritage. The narrative represented by the family of Barlaam and

Josaphat texts – a family of texts which in Medieval times spanned the three major religious civilizations of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, and which was translated into more than fifty languages – should prove an ideal focal point for an investigation of how cross-cultural communication originates and operates. How can one story have such lasting influence for people of vastly different linguistic and religious backgrounds? The present project focusses on the early textual history of this tale in the relevant languages, but will provide a crucial reference point for any other future study of the Barlaam and Josaphat literary complex.

It is also to be emphasised that the project has a heavy focus on the use of digital technology, and is thus a Digital Humanities initiative. Much work has been done by the Norwegian Institute of Philology (PHI) on the development of tools for multilingual processing, and the Barlaam and Josaphat material poses an interesting challenge for the development of new such technologies (texts that are either free translations or paraphrases, contextual material like images and photos of objects, a large number of potential versions must be included in the software structure, etc.). The *Barlaam and Josaphat Library* will thus be a new step in the development of the *Bibliotheca Polyglotta* (www.polyglotta.no), established by PHI in 2007.

References

- Almond, Philip C. (1987). "The Buddha of Christendom: A Review of the Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat", in: *Religious Studies* 23.3: 391-406.
- de Blois, François (2009). "On the sources of the Barlaam romance, or: How the Buddha became a Christian saint", in: d. D. Durkin-Meisteremst, Chr. Reck and D. Weber (eds.) *Literarische Stoffe und ihre Gestaltung in mittellirnanischer Zeit: Kolloquium anlässlich des 70. Geburtstages von Werner Sundermann*. Wiesbaden: Reichert.
- Bräm, T. (1994). "Barlaam et Josaphat," in: *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques* II.63–83.
- Budge, Sir E. A. Wallis (1923). *Baralâm and Yëwâsëf, Being the Ethiopic Version of a Christianized Recension of the Buddhist Legend of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva*. 2 volumes. Cambridge.
- Cordoni, Constanza (2014). *Barlaam und Josaphat in der europäischen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Engels, L. J. (1998). "Barlaam & Josaphat", in: Willem P Gerritsen; Anthony G. van Melle, eds., *A Dictionary of medieval heroes: characters in medieval narrative traditions and their afterlife in literature, theatre and the visual arts*. Woodbridge: Boydell. Pp. 47–52.
- Forster, Regula (2012). "Barlaam and Josaphat", in: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gennari, Pamela (2010). "Milione", *redazione VB: edizione critica commentata*. Doctoral Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.
- Johansson, Karl G. and Arvidsson, Maria (2009). *Barlaam i nord: legenden om Barlaam och Josaphat i den nordiska medeltidslitteraturen*. Oslo: Novus 2009.
- Laboulaye, Edouard de (1859). "Barlaam et Josaphat et le Lalita-vistara" (review of Stanislas Julien, *Les Avadânas: contes et apologues indiens inconnus jusqu'à ce jour, suivis de fables, de poésies et de nouvelles chinoises*, 3 volumes, Paris: B. Duprat), in: *Journal des Débats*, 21. Juli 1859.
- Lang, David Marshall (1966). *The Balavariani: A Tale from the Christian East*. Los Angeles: California University Press.
- Liebrecht, Felix (1860). "Die Quellen des 'Barlaam und Josaphat'", in *Jahrbuch für romanische und englische Sprache und Literatur* 2: 314–334.
- Moule, A. C. and Pelliot, Paul (1938). *Marco Polo: The Description of the World*. 2 volumes. London: George Routledge & Sons.
- Volk, Robert (2006). *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, VI/2: Historia animae utilis de Barlaam et Ioasaph (spuria): Text und zehn Appendices*. Berlin : De Gruyter.
- Volk, Robert (2009). *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, VI/1: Historia animae utilis de Barlaam et Ioasaph (spuria): Einführung*. Berlin: De Gruyter.