

ASVAGHOSA

Asvaghosa (***Buddhacarita***)

Birth c. 100 CE, north India

Death c. 150 CE, north India

Life

Asvaghosa was a poet and a philosopher, who first gave form to what later became known as the *kavya* (or epic) style in Sanskrit. Few details about his life can be gleaned from the historical record, although it seems that he was born a Brahmin and became an outspoken critic of Buddhism before he accepted its wisdom and became an adherent of this rival religion to Hinduism. Certainly, Asvaghosa became a member of the court of king Kanishka, who patronised Buddhism and was a Buddhist himself. His finest work is the *Buddhacarita*, an epic poem that is the first written biography of the historical Buddha. Legend maintains that Asvaghosa was a great orator who spoke about various Buddhist doctrines at the Fourth Buddhist Council, which he helped to organise. It is also said, mainly in Tibetan sources, that he was a talented musician who used his songs to propagate Buddhism.

Works

In addition to the *Buddhacarita*, he is also said to have written two other works of poetry in Sanskrit: *Saundarananda* and *Sariputraprakarana*. The first takes as its subject the conversion of the Buddha's half-brother, Nanda. And the second is a nine-act play describing another conversion, this time of a fictional character named Sariputra. Both texts are incomplete and are largely reconstructed from fragments and commentaries found in Tibetan material. Other texts have been attributed to him, but without convincing evidence.