

Śaṅkarācārya and the Founding of Four Monasteries

(abstract)

MATTHEW CLARK

This paper is a part of wider research that I have conducted into the history and organisation of the Daśanāmī-Saṁnyāsīs (or Daśanāmīs),¹ one of the largest of the sects of South Asian *sādhus* (renouncers). According to tradition, the sect was founded by the legendary *advaita* (non-dual) philosopher Śaṅkarācārya, whose floruit was most probably around 700 CE. Brief Sanskrit texts usually known as (*Śrī*) *Māthāmnāyas*—which are sometimes attributed to Śaṅkara's authorship by authorities within the tradition—tell of four *mathas* (monasteries) placed under the jurisdiction of Śaṅkara's four main disciples. These four *mathas*, also known as *pīthas*, are in the west, east, north and south of India: at Dvārakā (Gujarat), Jyōśimath/Badarīnāth (Uttaranchal, Himalayas), Purī (Orissa) and Śrīrgerī (Karnataka). In the *Māthāmnāyas* each of the ten names is assigned to one or another of the four *pīthas*, which were placed under the jurisdiction of Śaṅkara's four main disciples. One aspect of these texts is the legitimation of the four *pīthas*, to the exclusion of other claims. When candidates are initiated into the Daśanāmī-Saṁnyāsīs, they are told the specific elements—*pītha*, *gotra* (Brahmanical clan/lineage), *et cetera*—of the *āmnāya* that pertains to the initiating guru's lineage, which they are expected to memorise. The importance of these texts may be gauged not only from the intrinsic value of constituting a formal identity for various lineages of ascetics as an organised sect with a founder, but also from the fact that they have on many occasions been used as evidence in court cases concerning property, trusteeship and succession. An interesting feature of the *Māthāmnāyas* is that they represent virtually the sole textual locus of the tradition of the sect. Neither in Śaṅkara's own works nor in his hagiographies is there any mention of the founding of a sect of renunciates; only in relatively late hagiographic works, probably dating from the sixteenth century, is there a brief mention of 'ten names' and a scheme of four *mathas*.

The information of the *Māthāmnāyas* is repeated—with some minor differences—in virtually every commentary on the Daśanāmīs that has been published in the previous 150 years, and provides an overview of the Daśanāmī order, integrating the sect's ten lineages in a scheme that provides all Daśanāmīs with a commonly understood identity and a concise framework for their traditional religious history. However, my research indicates that the *Māthāmnāyas*, cannot be more than around four hundred years old. I suggest that the legend of Śaṅkarācārya founding four monasteries, encapsulated in the *Māthāmnāyas*, was created around the same time that the term '*daśanāmī*' became a marker of sectarian identity. The notion of monasteries at the four 'corners' of India added substance to the aspirations of a sect with a pan-Indian identity. In this paper the disparities between the sect's own traditional history regarding these monasteries, and historical evidence in the form of texts and inscriptions is analysed. Contests between rival institutions claiming legitimacy from being founded by Śaṅkara will be examined, and it will become apparent that the claims of the four monasteries supposedly founded under the jurisdiction of Śaṅkara's disciples were far from universally established even in the nineteenth century.

¹ *Daśanāmī* means 'he who has (one of) ten names'; *saṁnyāsa* refers to the act of renouncing worldly life.