Review

Ivan Andrijanić and Sven Selmer (eds.)

On the Growth and Composition of the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas: Relationship to Kāvya. Social and Economic Context (Proceedings of the Fifth Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, August 2008), Zagreb: Croation Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2016, XXXVI + 536 pp. ISBN 978 953 347 105 1. €60 (450 HRK).

This fifth volume of proceedings of the Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas (DICSEP) appears eight years after the fifth conference was held. Meanwhile, three more conferences have taken place, in 2011 (Genesis and History of the Sanskrit Epic and Purāṇic Texts: New Approaches), 2014 (Diachronical and Synchronical Approaches, Comparative and Text-immanent Interpretation of the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇic Texts), and 2017 (Locating and Dating of Texts, the Regions or Places and Time of their Origin; Locating and Dating of Manuscripts; Locating and Dating of their Contents). The present volume follows the standard format of the DICSEP proceedings: 1. a general introduction of summaries of the papers by the general editor of the series Mislav Ježić, 2. a synthetic introduction by Greg Bailey, 3. the articles included in the volume, 4. list of contributors, 5. two detailed indices (of passages cited and a general index), 6. summaries in Croatian by Ivan Andrijanić, and 7. table of contents in Croatian. The general layout likewise conforms to the well established style of the previous proceedings.

The volume goes in many different directions, as illustrated by the lengthy title consisting of a main title and two different subtitles separated by a mysterious middle dot. The main title and two subtitles make up for three of the five subject headings under which the individual papers have been organized. Since it is not possible to review each paper, I first of all list here the authors and titles for easy reference:

- *Growth of the Sanskrit Epic and Purāṇic Texts*: Alf Hiltebeitel, "The Archetypical Design of the Two Sanskrit Epics"; Oliver Hellwig, "A Computational Approach to the Text History of the Rāmāyaṇa"; Mislav Ježić, "Rāmāyaṇa and Dasarathajātaka"; Horst Brinkhaus, "Cosmogony in the Transition from Epic to Purāṇic Literature".
- *Social and Economic Context*: Johannes Bronkhorst, "Āśramas, Agrahāras and Monasteries"; Greg Bailey, "A Probe for Economic Data in the Mārkaṇḍeyasamāsyaparvan of the Mahābhārata (3,179–221)"; Yaroslav Vassilkov, "The Mahābhārata and Non-Vedic Aryan Traditions"; Tiziano Pantillo, "Droṇa and Bhīṣma as Borderline Cases in Brāhmaṇical Systematization: a Vrātya pattern in the Mahābhārata"; Przemysław Szczurek, "How Did Mādrī Die and

Why Was She Burnt Twice? Remarks on sahagamana in the Mahābhārata and on the Double Cremation of Pāṇḍu and Mādrī"; Danielle Feller, "The Strange Story of Princess Mādhavī".

– *Composition and Narrative Strategies in the Purāṇas*: Renate Söhnen-Thieme, "Mapping the Bhāgavatapurāṇa: Framework, Dialogue Structures, Time Concepts and Other Narrative Strategies"; McComas Taylor, "Textual Strategies, Empowerment and "True" Discourse in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa"; Kenneth Valpey, "Precept, Practice, and Persuasion: Truth and Heresy in the Viṣṇupurāṇa".

– *The Sanskrit Epics and Kāvya*: Patrick Olivelle, "Aśvaghoṣa and the Brahmanical Theology of the Epics and Dharmaśāstras"; Klara Gönc Moačanin, "The Nalopākhyāna Seen through the Lens of kāvya"; Lidia Sudyka, "The Repudiation of Sītā in Canto xx of the Bhaṭṭikāvya with Special Reference to the Use of Imperatives"; Anna Bonisoli Alquati, "Rāma's Story in Kālidāsa's Raghuvaṃśa".

– *Word Studies*: Sven Sellmer, "Aspects of Manas in the Mahābhārata"; Leonid Kulikov, "Sanskrit Reciprocal Pronouns: Their Semantics and Use in the Epics and Arthaśāstra (Is there Any Opposition between anyonyam and parasparam?)".

If all of this is a bit overwhelming, Bailey in the introduction makes a good attempt to tie the various articles together. He finds common ground in the *Mahābhārata*: "the majority of essays in this collection contribute to the hypothesis that the MBh is somewhat of a clearing house for the presentation of a more expansive view of the world than what is found in Vedic literature, whilst simultanously preserving the Vedic brahmin as an essential cultural marker in society." (p. 3). The *Mahābhārata* is indeed by far the most referred text in the collection (Hiltebeitel, Brinkhaus, Bronkhorst, Bailey, Vassilkov, Pontillo, Szczurek, Feller, Olivelle, Moačanin, Sellmer, Kulikov); several papers deal with aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Hiltebeitel, Hellwig, Ježić, Bronkhorst, Sudyka, Bonisoli Alquati, Kulikov), while only four out of the nineteen articles concern Purāṇas (Brinkhaus, Söhnen-Thieme, Taylor, Valpey). This relative distribution tells much about the present state of the field.

Mahābhārata studies in particular has developed into a sub-discipline, with its own internal methodological and theoretical debates. In his contribution, Hiltebeitel articulates his by now well-known view of a written *Mahābhārata* that already included the key notions of *dharma* and *bhakti* as part of its first design. His work is characteristically self-referential and circular. While the bibliography accompanying the paper lists 24(!) of his own published works, the more commonly accepted opposite view, articulated most prominently

by James Fitzgerald, involving a centuries-long process of composition and redaction including a second Gupta redaction, is dismissed in a single sentence, stating that it "has served mainly to fuel fancies of a pre-*bhakti* "*Bhārata*" and has never had a convincing Gupta rationale" (p. 31). At the other end of the spectrum, Bronkhorst's contribution makes only passing reference to the *Mahābhārata* epic, being largely concerned with assembling evidence for his hypothesis that the institution of *āśrama* ("hermitage") referred to in literary sources and *agrahāra* ("the institution of giving land to Brahmins") mentioned in inscriptions form effectively two sides of the same coin, representing on the one hand the perspective of the donee and on the other that of the donor. Two other papers concerned with the *Mahābhārata* (Vassilkov, Pontillo) take an even longer range perspective, arguing in different ways that the *Mahābhārata* testifies to the intense interactions between early *vrātya* and *śrauta* communities. In Vassilkov's words, "If we look at the earliest Indo-Aryan society not through Vedic texts, but taking into account all the other evidence, we see that the centers of Vedic culture emerged against a background of *vrātya* culture, and existed for centuries as islands in a sea of *vrātya* communities." (pp. 186–187). Other articles included in the volume take up a range of different aspects of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, from narrative analyses to individual word studies, including, as indicated by the second subtitle, their influence on the production of Kāvya literature.

The poor relation remains purāṇic studies, with four articles included in the present volume. Brinkhaus in characteristic fashion traces parallels and changes of small tracts of cosmogony in the transition from epic to purāṇic literature, focussing this time on *Harivaṃśa* 1.15–39 in comparison to the tracts included in *Mahābhārata* 13.224–225, *Manusmṛti* 1, *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* 1.3, *Vāyupurāṇa* 4, *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* 45, and *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 1.2. He concludes that the *Harivaṃśa* is the first source to connect "the description of the genesis of the world" with "the genealogical tracing of main heroes back to their primeval ancestors" (p. 132). The other three articles are each concerned with a single Purāṇa; Söhnen-Thieme and Taylor with the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, and Valpey with the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*. Söhnen-Thieme maps the overall structure of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, by identifying "the framework, the dialogue layers, and other devices that may have had an influence on the conception and presentation of the Purāṇa as a whole, and into which the activivities of the Bhagavān, called *līlāvatāras*, have been integrated" (p. 307). Both Taylor and Valpey study ways in which the Purāṇa texts are involved in "truth-making". Taylor continues his work on the application of Foucault's notion of a "regime of truth" to Sanskrit didactic literature, asking the question "what enables the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* to function as "true discourse" for a reader or listener within a purāṇic

epistemic community?" (p. 340), while Valpey investigates how "truth-claims (precept) are to be sustained through rhetorical practices (expression) and ritual (practice)" (p. 375) with reference to *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 3.16–18, a section of the Purāṇa describing Viṣṇu's acts of divine deception. It is disappointing to find that none of these studies refer to, let alone make use of, the critical editions of the *Bhāgavata-* and *Viṣṇupurāṇa*.[1] In purāṇic studies it sometimes seems everything goes. It is one thing to disagree with the methodology or approach of a critical edition, or be dissatisfied with its results, but quite another to neglect it.

This attitude may be contrasted, at first sight, with the reception and use of the critical editions of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Compare, in the present volume, Hiltebeitel's opening words: "Thanks to the Critical Editions of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is, I believe, possible to demonstrate that they have been pulled into a similar archetypal design. My view of the Critical Editions is that, despite complaints from all sides, they are more dispositive of an archetype than has been appreciated." (p. 21). The text of the Poona edition of both epics has come to acquire canonical status, perhaps not least because of the easy availability of electronic editions prepared by Muneo Tokunaga and revised by John Smith. If one takes a closer look, however, it is striking that very few papers refer to or engage with variant readings or passages that have been excised from the main text of the critical edition. A telling example is Pontillo's paper, which claims to be the first study to have collected "all the MBh occurrences of the term *vrātya*", but only refers to passages from the main text of the Poona edition and refrains from taking into account the following occurrences of the term: MBh 8.30.47 *391, l. 3; MBh 12.49.62 *111, l. 12; MBh 12 App. 1 No. 9, l. 3, l. 8; MBh 13 App. 1 No. 7A, l. 250; MBh 14 App. 1 No. 4, l. 288. Given the volume's title "On the Growth and Composition …" the reader might have expected more engagement with questions of change and growth of both epics in this respect. The tendency to take the main text as final contrasts markedly with the modest words of the chief editor of the Poona critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, V.S. Sukthankar, expressed in the prolegomena to the edition of the *Ādiparvan*, and worth quoting again in this regard: "It is to be feared that there is no royal road in this incomparably difficult field. The only path left open to us by which we may return to the original Mahābhārata or Bhārata is the rough, narrow, scientific foot-path of repeated trial and error. More than

---

1 H.G. Shastri (ed.), *The Bhāgavata* [*Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*]: *Critical Edition*. Ahmedabad: B.J. Institute of Learning and Research, 1996–2002 (4 volumes in 6 parts). M.M. Pathak (ed.), *The Critical Edition of the Viṣṇupurāṇam*. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1997, 1999 (2 volumes).

one attempt will probably have to be made before the ideal is attained. It will, therefore, be prudent not to claim too much for the *first* critical edition, nor to expect too much from it."[2] The general lack of engagement with questions of text-criticism is also apparent in the fact that none of the papers make use of manuscripts or involve new text editions by any of the authors.

Despite these critical observations, this DICSEP volume again contains something for everyone interested in the broader field of Sanskrit epics and Purāṇas. In the concluding words of Greg Bailey: "Given these are arguably the foundation texts of Hinduism and the seminal expression of the transition from early forms of religiosity and society to what became a Hindu society in all its complexity, serious critical attention must still be given to them, especially since they continue to be living texts." (p. 17). It is to be hoped that the remaining proceedings of DICSEP 6, 7 and 8 will appear within a shorter period of time.

Peter Bisschop
Leiden University
p.c.bisschop@hum.leidenuniv.nl

---

2   V.S. Sukhthankar, *Prolegomena* [*to the critical edition of the Ādiparvan, book 1 of the Mahā-bhārata*]. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933 [p. civ]. Italics in the original.