On Beginnings

Introductions and Prefaces in Kārya

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A. Introduction

In a recent article I drew attention to the occurrence of the word mādhyāra in Aśoka’s fourteenth Rock Edict. This edict serves as an epilogue to the preceding 13 edicts in providing some reflections on the “genre” of royal missives. With this mādhyāra I argued that we are dealing with an early instance of a technical term known from the later kārya poetical tradition. On the basis of the occurrence of the term in the Aśoka inscriptions it was next suggested that the kārya literary tradition is heir to, or a continuation of, a scholarly tradition regarding royal missives developed by clerks employed in the royal chancery. This conclusion is corroborated by the close association of kārya with the court.

It is indeed not difficult to see how the careful, self-conscious style of kārya could have developed out of the art of composing diplomatic letters. In addition to that, this finding connects kārya specifically with communication through writing. While we may assume that in Aśoka’s time written communication was a relatively recent phenomenon and while it is not unlikely that this mode of communication may have existed side by side with the oral delivery of royal instructions for quite some time through messengers, in the light of the later developments it may be argued that once the possibilities, advantages and prestige of a written communication—and administration—were realized, royal attention went almost entirely in that direction. It now appears that kārya had its origin in, or was part of, this particular trajectory. In fact, with its long, complicated metres, its many linguistic tricks and its convoluted images, kārya indeed looks typically like written literature, with writing providing the necessary time to plan the text on the part of the author, and time to study and analyze it on the part of the reader. For all that, I do not wish to rule out the possibility that kārya was occasionally composed on the spot or could be appreciated once recited. The point I want to make here is that the style of kārya is easier to explain as the outcome of developments in written literature meant to be read.

In what follows I take up the question of the “roots” of kārya again by following yet another avenue. The earliest kārya texts available include so-called mabhākāryas, namely the Buddhacarita and Saundarananda by Aṣṭavaghoṣa (first century AD), plays, such as Aṣṭavaghoṣa’s Śrīripatraṇaśayana, and a prose inscription, namely the Gīrṇār inscription of Rudradāman (mid-second century). Later, the number of genres multiplied, with, among other texts, inscriptions in verse and prose, lyric poetry, so-called vanśās or genealogical poems, prose romances, and historical novels. I will try to show that among all these genres the mabhākārya was the first, that is to say, that it was the kārya poets’ own invention. I argue that the other genres are the result of attempts on the part of these poets to adopt, and kārya-ize, existing types of compositions of poets and performers from different milieus than their own.

Next, I will argue that mabhākārya represents an elaboration in kārya style of the epic. At that point an attempt is made to combine this idea with the one which places the beginning of kārya in the royal chancery by trying to answer the question of what might have been the relationship of the scribes and the clerks employed there and the epic tradition. By way of conclusion the scenario for the origins of kārya developed here will be compared to one recently put forward by Stephanie Jamison, who sees in kārya a direct continuation of Vedic literature.4

1. This contribution, which was originally written in Jerusalem in 2004, has been brought up to date in the end of 2011. The author would like to thank Stephanie Jamison for her stimulating comments on the earlier version of this article.

2. Tieken 2006. Unfortunately the translation given there of the particular passage in the edict is not correct. aṣṭi ca hetā pravasam pravatī (variant vato) tata tata satta sukhaṃ mādhyāraśya should be translated: “On the other hand here (in these edicts) some things have been said over and over again because of their sweetness.”

3. For Pollock, writing is a fundamental component of kārya (Pollock 2006, 5 and passim).

B. Types of Beginnings

A striking feature of the first generation of epic kāvya texts, or mahākāvya, is the absence of any kind of introduction. The texts immediately begin with the story. In this they stand apart from the other literary genres, which have “proper” introductions and prefaces. A closer look at the confines of these introductions and prefaces suggests that in mahākāvya the poets play, as it were, a home game, while in the other genres they are treading on foreign ground. In order to make that clear, I first present an overview of the beginnings in different kāvya genres. In doing so I base myself mainly on the earliest examples of the genres involved, in which the following five main types may be distinguished.

Type 1

As said, the first mahākāvya, or sargabandhas, immediately begin with the story itself. A good example is Kālidāsa’s Kumānsambhata (fourth or fifth century AD), which begins with the word asti “Once upon a time there was”. Examples by an earlier writer are Āśvagoṣha’s Buddhacarita and Saundarananda (first century). A special case is formed by Māgha’s Śūnapāladhadha (seventh century) and Bhāravi’s Kīrtārjunīya (sixth century), both of which begin with the auspicious word śrī. In the Śūnapāladhadha the last verse of each sarga likewise contains the same word śrī. In the Kīrtārjunīya each sarga ends with a verse containing the equally auspicious word lakṣmī. In fact, retrospectively the occurrence of the word śrī at the beginning of these two texts might put a different light on the name Gautama with which Āśvagoṣha’s Saundarananda begins.5 For information on the authors and titles of these texts we have to fall back on colophons, which, strictly speaking, are not part of the texts proper.6

In later mahākāvyas the situation has changed. For instance, the Jñānabhairava (seventh or eighth century), which begins with the words āśīd ātasyām, is, like the Śūnapāladhadha (see n. 6), concluded by a set of four verses providing a genealogy of its author Kumāradāsa. These four verses are again followed by a colophon mentioning the author, the title of the text, and the number of the final chapter. The Bhāṭṭikāyya (seventh century), which opens with the words abhin vapi, ends with a so-called kāryapraśasti of four verses, in which the author professes, among other things, that his text can be enjoyed only by the highly learned. In the last verse he mentions that he (maṇi) had composed the poem in the town of Valabhi during the reign of King Narendra, Śrīdharā’s son. However, the author’s name is known to us only from the colophon. Yet another case which may be mentioned here is Ratnakara’s Haravijaya (ninth century). This text opens with three verses, in which Śīva, Viṣṇu, and Brahmā respectively are asked to protect the reader, after which the story begins with the word astī. The text is concluded with what has been labeled a granthokarita praśasti, which, among other things, mentions the name of the author and the title of the work.

Type 2

At the other end of the spectrum of the earlier verse mahākāvya we find prose romances. The latter are preceded by proper prefaces, which, as they are in verse, are clearly set apart from the texts proper. The earliest examples of these prefaces are found in Subandhu’s Vīśvaśāttā and Bāṇa’s Kādambari, which, however, are both relatively late texts (probably seventh century). In each of the prefaces we may distinguish three sections. Thus, they begin with several verses praising the gods or asking them to protect the readers. Henceforth such verses at the beginning are referred to as maṅgala verses. This is followed by a set of verses, in which, among other things, unjust criticism is anticipated. In what follows this topic of the second section will for brevity’s sake be referred to by the term “apology.” In the Kādambari this is followed by the genealogy of the author, in the Vīśvaśāttā by a mere reference to the name of the author. Immediately after this, the story proper begins, with the word abhīd in the Vīśvaśāttā and with āśīd in the Kādambari. It should be noted that neither preface supplies the title of the work. In fact, they do not even give an indication of the topic. In addition, the two texts differ in the identification of the type of work they belong to, the Kādambari identifying itself as a kathā and the Vīśvaśāttā as a prabandha.

A text type that may be included in this category is the anthology. Probably the earliest example of an anthology is Hāla’s Sattasai, a collection of 700 erotic anāra verses in the so-called Māhārāṣtrī Prakrit. The Sattasai is generally taken to have been compiled in the beginning of our era. This early dating is based on the ascription of the compilation to the Sātavāhana King Hāla. However, the first reference to the Sattasai is found only in the relatively late Harṣacarita (seventh

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5. Unfortunately it is impossible to establish with certainty if something like this is also found in Āśvagoṣha’s Buddhacarita as the beginning of this text is only available in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

6. Note that the Śūnapāladhadha ends with a section of five stanzas in which the author describes his own lineage. He does not, however, mention his own name.
century). Furthermore, as I have tried to show elsewhere, the *Sattasai* presupposes a text like the *Kāmaśīttra* if not the *Kāmaśīttra* itself. This means that the *Sattasai* may have to be dated much later than has been done so far. In fact, it is uncertain if the text is earlier than, for instance, Kālidāsa. Like the two romances discussed earlier, the *Sattasai* opens with a gāthā exhorting the reader to honor (yamaṭha) Śiva and Gauri, who are portrayed in an erotic situation here. This gāthā corresponds to the maṅgala. In the second gāthā it is said that though the *Sattasai* is in Prakrit, this is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, the *Sattasai* is claimed to be superior to the *Kāmaśīttra*, which refers to learned treatises in Sanskrit on the topic of kāma. This gāthā corresponds more or less to the apology section. Finally, in the third gāthā the compilation of the anthology is ascribed to the Sātvāhana King Hāla. With the fourth gāthā the text proper begins. As can be gathered from this description, the beginning of the *Sattasai* resembles the prefaces discussed earlier. At the same time, its preface differs from the ones in the *Kādambari* and *Vaiśnavadattā* in that it consists of verses in the same meter as those of the text proper. As a result there is in this case no clear formal break between the "preface" and the beginning of the text itself.

**Type 3**

The prologue of a Sanskrit drama opens with one or more maṅgala verses. This is followed by a conversation between the stage manager and an actress, usually his wife, in which the name of the playwright and the title of the play are mentioned. In some cases the occasion for the performance is specified as well and some information on the nature of the play is provided.

The prologues in this category are not detachable from the text of the play proper as in the case of prose romances. On the contrary, they are an indissoluble part of it. As I see it, the prologue is meant to convey the message that the text is about to start is not a text but a performance to be watched. The earliest example in question, a play by Aśvaghoṣa, dates from the first century. Unfortunately the beginning of the play is missing, as a result of which we are unable to know if it ever had a prologue. The *Svapnavāsavadattā* and *Prātiṣṭānayaugandharīyaṇa*, two plays by Kālidāsa’s predecessor Bhāsa, do have prologues, but the two plays are known only through relatively late south Indian adaptations.

As a result the first certain evidence of prologues is found with Kālidāsa, whose oeuvre includes three plays.

**Type 4**

The situation in Bāṣa’s *Harṣacarita*, one of the earliest known historical novels (seventh century), seems to show a combination of the traditions as found in dramas, on the one hand, and prose romances, on the other. *Harṣacarita’s* preface, which altogether consists of 21 verses, follows the pattern of prose romances up to a certain point. Thus, it opens with three maṅgala verses. In the remaining 18 verses the poet informs us that if despite many illustrious predecessors his poor self has decided to tell the history of Harṣa, this is basically done out of loyalty to that king (the apology part). Immediately after that the story begins (*eṣam anuvāyaṃ pakti kīta*). If we compare this to the prefaces of prose romances we see that the information about the author is missing. However, this is precisely what the first part of the text proper is about, which informs us in quite some detail of Bāṣa’s genealogy, his relationship to King Harṣa, estranged if at first but finally patched up, and how he was brought to tell the adventures of Harṣa, or at least part of them. While the preface to the *Harṣacarita* does not supply the title of the work, it does give an indication of the topic. The *Harṣacarita* appears to be not just a story about Harṣa’s adventures, but a story about a poet telling the adventures of his patron. The story of Harṣa’s adventures proper begins only somewhere in the middle of the third chapter (p. 94), starting with the words īśrāvatīm asti, “listen, there was ....” In Vākpati’s *Ganēṣavaha* (eighth century) basically the same pattern is found, though information about the author, or rather, the teller of the story, has been integrated into the text proper in a much more subtle way.

Another variant is seen in Bīhaṇa’s *Vikramādityacarita* (twelfth century), a historical novel in verses about the south Indian King Vikramāditya. In the eighteenth and final canto of this work the poet relates how he had arrived from Kasmir, where he was born, to Kālaṇja in south India at the court of King Vikramāditya. In contrast to the *Harṣacarita* the poet’s “autobiography” has thus been placed at the end of the poem.

**Type 5**

The format of Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvaṃśa*, which consists entirely of verses divided into sarga, agrees with that of the *mahākāvya*. However, as to its contents, we are dealing with a unique work, a *sarga*, which tells the story of the *Raghu*
The only other examples of the genre are found in Buddhist literature (Dīpa- and Mahābhāsya). The Rāghuvaṃśa starts with a maṅgala verse in which Śiva and Pārvati are praised. Next, the author contrasts the greatness of the solar dynasty to the pettiness of his own intellectual abilities. In the first of the two final verses of the introduction he announces that he will nevertheless describe the lineage of that dynasty; the very virtues of the Rāghu dynasty compel him to commit this rashness. Finally, he recommends the result of his efforts to learned, literary men. After this the work proper begins with a verse describing Manu, the second hemistich of which contains the word aśīt.

In this introduction the author refers to himself in the first person (I am not referring to vande in the maṅgala verse here, which is quite common, but to vākye in verse 9). Though this is not uncommon (see, for instance, the preface to the Harṣacarita as well as the end of the Bhāṣṭikāśya), the Rāghuvaṃśa differs in this from prose romances, which refer to the author in the third person. In fact, the beginning of the Rāghuvaṃśa resembles more the situation in plays than the one in prose romances. Thus, like the prologue to a drama the introductory matter appears to be part of the text itself. In any case, the introduction is in the same anuṣṭubh meter found in the first sarga. In this connection it should also be noted that while the text proper begins with the word aśīt, this word is not found at the very beginning of the verse but in the middle. It is almost as if Kālidāsa was varying on a traditional pattern here.

Another work that may be mentioned along with Kālidāsa’s Rāghuvaṃśa is his Meghadūta. At first sight it is tempting to include this poem in the category of works that lack an introduction, as it begins abruptly with the word kācit “[There was] some [yakṣa who ...]”. The greatest part of the Meghadūta consists of the words with which this yakṣa, who had been banished for having neglected his duty, directed a cloud to his wife left behind in his native town Alakā. In the beginning of the Meghadūta the situation of the yakṣa is briefly described. Only with verse six does the yakṣa’s address to the cloud begin. In a way the beginning of the Meghadūta resembles that of, for instance, the Rāghuvaṃśa, except for the fact that the yakṣa is not just an objective, professional teller of someone else’s adventures but is personally involved in the situation. In fact, the point may be lying precisely in this difference, in that the Meghadūta, at least as far as its setting is concerned, aligns with the lyrical tradition, in which each poem requires a fictional speaker and an imaginary situation in order to become convincing.

C. The Storyteller in the Text and His Relationship to the External Author

The function of the "introduction" in the Harṣacarita may be compared to that of the prologue in Sanskrit drama. In both cases the author is written into the text as its author or as the bard who told the story for the first time. However, in the Harṣacarita, the text as a whole, that is, the introduction and the story proper, is preceded by a preface in verse. The main part of the preface is dedicated to the poet’s apology. I think one may legitimately ask why in the case of the Harṣacarita the apology was not integrated into the first part of the text as well. In fact, it even seems possible to detect a contradiction between the preface and the introductory part. In the preface, Bāṇa is reluctant to tell the story, fearing that he will not be able to match the literary excellence of his predecessors in the field. In the work proper it is modesty of another kind, namely the heroic fears


13. With the term "introduction" I refer here to the remarks made by the storyteller throughout the telling of the story, on which, see Tiekken 2001c.

14. Reference is made here to the final chapter, in which the author, or rather, the teller of the story, relates how he had arrived at the king's court. As indicated earlier, this part corresponds to the opening of the Harṣacarita, in which we are informed, among other things, how Bāṇa had arrived at Harṣa's court.
performed by Harṣa, which are so many that it is impossible to tell them in a lifetime.

Whatever is exactly the case here, by introducing a second Bāṇa (the author next to the bard or storyteller) the preface seems to destroy the fiction created in the text proper. It is tempting to conclude that the preface in verse to the historical novel is a later addition or else the result of a conflation of two independent traditions, a historical novel with its own fictional introduction and texts with prefaces.

This brings to mind one of the most widely known texts about storytelling, namely Daṇḍin’s Daśakumārakacitra (eighth century). In the Daśakumārakacitra the storyteller is not a poet or courtier, but the yuvāniṣṭa and his nine companions. At a certain point during their digvijaya these ten young men get separated from one another. In the end they all come together again and each of them is invited to tell what happened to him in the meantime. In their capacity of storytellers, the ten young men in the Daśakumārakacitra stand on a par with Bāṇa in the Haracarita, and as in the latter case, their “family histories” and their relationship to one another are dealt with in the first part of the text. But in contrast to the Haracarita, the Daśakumārakacitra does not have any additional prefatory matter (except for a maṅgaṇa verse), though in this case, in fact, the text assumes an external, all-knowing author besides the ten young men, who is responsible for the work as a whole. However, as in the case of the type-1 mahākathās, the name of the author is mentioned only in the colophon, though it is practically given away in the maṅgaṇa verse, which abounds in instances of the word daṇḍa. As far as I know there is no evidence of an attempt to change the situation in the Daśakumārakacitra; apparently the text as we have it, that is, without any preface, was considered complete and self-sufficient.

However, there are scholars, such as Lienhard, who maintain that the first part of the Daśakumārakacitra, the so-called pūrvapīṭhikā, has been added to it after the original beginning had been lost. In this connection the Avantisundari is mentioned, which corresponds to the first part of the pūrvapīṭhikā and might have formed the original beginning of the Daśakumārakacitra. Unlike the latter text, the prose Avantisundari does have a full-fledged preface in verse. Thus, it opens with a maṅgaṇa verse praising Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu. This is followed by verses in which earlier poets are praised. Next, still in verse, Daṇḍin’s genealogy is given. Immediately after that the prose text starts, beginning with Daṇḍin’s travels and his arrival at the Pallava court and ending at the point where the tale of Avantisundari begins (p. 17). The Avantisundari seems to present us with precisely that external, all-knowing author who had been absent from the Daśakumārakacitra.

All this, however, does not necessarily mean that the Avantisundari is more original than the Daśakumārakacitra or that the latter is only an abstract, lifted out as it were from the former work. In this connection it should be noted that the evidence put forward in support of the secondary nature of the pūrvapīṭhikā of the Daśakumārakacitra is slender, or else of an impressionistic nature. Furthermore, on closer consideration, the Avantisundari is a most peculiar text. Thus, anyone who after reading about Daṇḍin’s genealogy, his travels, his arrival at the Pallava court, and, next, his expulsion and subsequent return, would expect something political as the trigger for Daṇḍin’s storytelling, will be disappointed. The story about Avantisundari is meant to explain the miracle of the transformation of a lotus into a visīyākaraṇī. Moreover, while using partly the same story material, the Daśakumārakacitra and Avantisundari seem to present two entirely different genres. Thus, while the Daśakumārakacitra, for all the fantastic elements found in it, is basically a political novel, the Avantisundari, for all the political intrigue it contains, starts off as a fantasy tale. In fact, this seems to mark the beginning of the Avantisundari almost definitely as a hybrid composition. For, while by beginning with a report on Daṇḍin’s travels and his final arrival at the Pallava court it aligns with the historical novel (Haracarita and Vikeśvarākhyadhevara-carita), through the story of Avantisundari it resembles the fantasy tale (Vivasvadatta and Kālīkambā). For all we know, the relationship between the two compositions might well be the other way around from what has been assumed so far, the Avantisundari being a later elaboration of the Daśakumārakacitra, or part of it, and the fantasy tale. For our purpose it is important to note that the absence of any preface to the Daśakumārakacitra cannot automatically be attributed to, for instance, the loss of part of the text, but might present the text’s original form.

In connection with the phenomenon of the preface it should be noted that two of the types of works in which it is found, the historical novel and the fantasy tale, seem to have appeared on the scene relatively late. In general it might be argued that a genre is earlier than its first attested examples. However, in this case there is some evidence to suggest that the historical novel and fantasy tale, as genres, are indeed not much older than their earliest examples and that these two genres did not yet exist, at least not within the kavya tradition, in Kālidāsa’s time. The composition of that poet’s oeuvre bears this out.

15. It should, again, be mentioned that in the preface the name of the author does not occur.
16. Lienhard 1984, 236.

18. Note that the title of the Avantisundari is of the same type as that of the Kālidāsa and Vivasvadattī.
If we compare Kālidāsa’s oeuvre with that of, for instance, Bhavabhūti or Harṣa, what strikes the eye is the diversity of the types of works or genres represented in it. Bhavabhūti’s oeuvre consists only of plays, three in number. Likewise, we possess three plays by Harṣa. As I have shown elsewhere,19 the plays of each of these playwrights appear to be related to each other through a specific theme: in Bhavabhūti’s plays that of women being kidnapped and rescued and in Harṣa’s plays that of people getting lost and being found again. Something similar is also found in Kālidāsa’s works, which each in their own way deal with the phenomenon of the curse. However, while with Harṣa and Bhavabhūti we see variations of one and the same theme in works of the same genre, with Kālidāsa we see one and the same theme, that is, the curse, elaborated upon in works belonging to different genres, namely a mahākātyya, a maḥākātyya-like work, dramas, and a short lyric text. And the variation attested goes even further. Thus, as already indicated, the Kūmāravīrambhāvat is clearly a different type of work than the Raghuvaṃśa;20 and the same applies to his three dramas, the Sakuntalā which has a story based on epic mythology, the Mālavikāgnimitra which is a historical drama, and the Vīkenamūravāṭya which is experimental in containing āṭhina songs. Given this situation it may be asked why, if at the time the historical novel or the fantasy tale had already existed, they were not included in Kālidāsa’s oeuvre as well. Admittedly, a curse might have been difficult to give a place in a historical novel (as it was in the Mālavikāgnimitra, in which case the curse was relegated to the play within a play) but the stories of the fantasy tales actually thrive on curses.

Though this line of argument can hardly be applied to the other text type with a preface, namely the anthology, it is tempting to conclude that, with the historical novel and fantasy tales, the preface is a relatively late phenomenon in the kāyya tradition, probably only dating from the time after Kālidāsa. As for the preface in the Sattvata, it should be noted that, tradition apart, there is no evidence that this anthology is indeed older than Kālidāsa (see footnotes 7 and 8).

### D. The Significance of the Absence of an Introduction in Mahākātyya

One way to find out what it means for a work to have no introductory matter is to look at the kind of information contained in the introductory parts of the texts that do have them. I suggest that for the moment we leave out of consideration the preface, which might well be a later phenomenon. Starting with the dramatic genre, besides mentioning the playwright, the prologue refers to the performance of the play. While reading the text of the play one is to imagine that it is performed on stage. The introductions to the Harṣacarita and Daśakumāra-carita likewise present us with storytellers at work or occasions at which stories are told. And the introduction of the Raghuvaṃśa evokes a bard about to recount (nākye “I will relate”) the vaṃśa of the Raghu family.

All these beginnings presuppose live-performances of the texts concerned, namely the performance of a play in front of an audience, the telling of the king’s adventures in the midst of a group of friends and relatives, or the presumably public recitation of the dynasty’s vaṃśa. Such performances seem to be a far cry from the world of the kāyya poets who, as has been suggested above, were writers composing slowly and in silence and not extempore performers. In the introductions the authors of the texts cast themselves in roles, which originally were not theirs. Mutatis mutandis, it is tempting to argue that in mahākātyya, which does not have a beginning, the poets were being themselves, using or re-using material and techniques which they could by right consider their own. In the plays, the Raghuvaṃśa, and the historical novel, which presuppose live performance traditions by professional actors, panegyrists and story-tellers we would be dealing with attempts by these same poets at kāyya-ization or bowdlerization of certain existing (popular) genres.21

### E. Kāyya and Epic

If with mahākātyya the poets were indeed on familiar ground, they also produced something new. What, then, is it that they were doing? In what follows I suggest that they were experimenting with the epic tradition by adapting it to a new literary mode.

A striking feature of mahākātyya are its long and complex meters as well as their enormous variety within a given text. The distribution of the meters coincides with the division of the texts into sarga, or chapters, each of which has a particular meter of its own. Usually, the final verses of a chapter are, however, in a different meter. By presenting a story divided into “chapters” and by being

19. For more details, see Tiekert 2001d and 2005a.
20. Both texts have in common, however, that they end seemingly abruptly. On this phenomenon, see Tiekert 1989.
21. What is said here in connection with the origin of kāyya should be distinguished from later developments, when Sanskrit dramas were actually performed, and mahākārya recited, and submitted to the judgement of live audiences. Furthermore, the type of textual variants found in kāyya texts seems to suggest that these texts were learned by heart and recited from memory. Even nowadays one may find pandits who are able to compose Sanskrit verses on the spot or to follow the recitation of kāyya verses. As far as I see it, one should be careful, though, to project that state of affairs uncritically on the beginning of kāyya poetry. In any case, my argument is that features characteristic of kāyya have their origin in written literature.
composed in verse the Mahābhārata closely resembles the epic. At the same time, by its use of complicated meters, mahākālia is as far removed from the epic as is possible. Thus, while the epic uses a short and relatively free meter, the śloka or anuśṭubh, which, we are to believe, is typical of extempore, on the spot composition, the kātya meters are generally much longer and have a rigidly fixed distribution of long and short syllables. These two features presumably coincide with a slow process of composition by writing. As I see it, in mahākālia we might be dealing with the creation of a new kind of “epic” poetry which as a written variety was as far as possible removed from the presumably oral epic poetry. The use of a standardized, classical language instead of the “irregular” epic Sanskrit and the introduction of an elaborate style instead of the straightforward epic style were part of this literary experiment.

F. The Scribes’ Background

What does these poets’ preoccupation with the epic genre tradition tell us about the origin of the clerks or scribes employed in the king’s chancery from whom they seem to have descended? There are some indications, which seem to suggest that the epic tradition as presented by, for instance, the Mahābhārata was used to be part of the repertory of the ritual specialists officiating at the large-scale royal sacrifices. In this connection I would like to go back to a recent study by me of the Mahābhārata, in which I suggested that the story of the Mahābhārata portrays the competitive and self-destructive world of the potlatch. In this world every act of liberality and sacrifice is seen as a challenge and has to be retaliated by an act of even greater liberality and sacrifice. In the Mahābhārata, the Pañcāvas and Kauravas find themselves caught in such an ongoing competition. At the same time there is no gift that cannot be surpassed and there is no final winner. For even after one has given the greatest gift of all, namely one’s own life, the competition does not end with that. It just begins all over again. Thus, before the Pañcāvas start on their final departure, they hand over Hastinapura to Yuṣutu, a bastard son of Dhrūvaṇa. At the same time they place Arjunā’s great grandson Parīśot on the throne. In this way they create a similar situation to the one with

22. One may wonder if the division of one of the earliest mahākāliyas, namely Audaghaṇa’s Sundaranamāda, into 18 sargas, which number corresponds to the division of the mahābhārata into 18 books, is coincidental.

23. Most verses in an epic tradition stand on their own. In mahākālia we may come across strings of verses, each of which contain a relative clause depending on the main clause, which may follow or precede. This appears to be the metrical counterpart of the descriptive embedded sentences typical of kātya prose style. At the same time, however, the stringing of verses does involve a radical break with epic literature in verse.


which the Mahābhārata started, with the Kauravas as the legal heirs to the throne but the Pañcāvas being the actual rulers.

In its portrayal of such a society, the Mahābhārata seems to reflect the same concern which preoccupied the authors of the inānātātras, who, as shown by Heesterman, resolved the “problem” by taking the sting out of the sacrifice by removing the rival. There is also some more concrete evidence that the epics were indeed preserved in the milieu of these ritual specialists. Thus, while the epics abound in stories about bards who are invited to sacrificial undertakings to recite epic stories, or who drop in on them, reminiscences of such incidents are found in the so-called pārāśāstra of the āśvamedha. However, in the inānātātra version of the horse sacrifice the recitation of the itihāsas and purāṇas is not carried out by bards but by the officiating priests (brahṇas) themselves. The epics appear to have been part of the curriculum of the ritual specialists.

To sum up: as mentioned, in the course of the sacrifice the priests recited epic stories, a task which in the pre-inānātā period was performed by wandering bards. When these same priests subsequently started to take care of the king’s correspondence, they brought with them, beside their theory of sacrifice, the epic tradition. When these scribes subsequently started experimenting with the writing of literature in the style and language developed for diplomatic correspondence, they began, I would say almost naturally, with the literature with which they themselves were most familiar, the epic.

The scribes’ concern with epic poetry in a way helps to understand their step from formal letters and legal documents to fictional, imaginative literature. A question, which in this context immediately arises is, however, why they did not experiment with Vedic poetry, with which they must have been familiar as well. Later I discuss a recent, alternative scenario for the origin of kātya which indeed traces it back directly to the Vedic poetic tradition. Here I only want to note that Vedic poetry is not literature in the strict sense of the word. It consists of powerful mantras with which it is possible to influence the cosmos and life itself.

25. Heesterman 1993, passim. It may be interesting to note that later thinking about Vedic ritual, which tries to remove all forms of potential conflict from the sacrifices, or rather, the communal sacrificial feasts, agrees with Ašoka’s rejection of sanātana in Rock Edict 1, even though in the latter case the reason given for disapproving these meetings is not the destructive nature of the sacrifices or the obvious law-and-order problem they create but the need to slaughter so many animals at such occasions.

26. At the very beginning of the Mahābhārata we see how Ugrāśiras arrived at Śaunaka’s 12-year sacrifice, where he repeats Vyās’s Mahābhārata as he had heard it being recited by Vaśamāṇya at Janaśmanad’s Snake Sacrifice. Note also that Kuśa and Lava make their appearance and recite the Rāmaśāstra at their father Rāma’s āśvamedha.


28. This (investigative) theory of sacrifice (minadhara) fathered the later juridical argumentation (see Lingat 1967; 163f.), which may be supposed to have another occupation of the king’s scribes.
More importantly, precisely because of the power attributed to these mantras one does not meddle with their style and language. Epic poetry, on the other hand, for all its ritual and mythological significance, has always had an element of diversion: during the year-long aśvamedha, when the princes were following the horse which had been set free in the countryside, bards helped those who had stayed behind to pass away the time by telling stories. Furthermore, the epic stories dealt largely, if not exclusively, with royal concerns. It was the type of stories the court was familiar with and interested in, and in which it could recognize much of itself.

However, mahākāvyas is not a direct successor of the epics, that is to say, it did not succeed the epics in their ritual function. Instead, it seems to belong exclusively to the "new" position of the scribes in the royal chancery, who in the poems bear witness to their linguistic and stylistic skills. Beside letters, these skills found expression in inscriptions (in particular the prāśastās) and in literary texts. It is unclear, however, what role these literary texts played in court life. They may have featured in contests between poets organized by kings and other rich patrons mentioned in later sources. One such contest, a so-called kavisamajā or kātyaṇagaṇa, presided over by the king, is described in Chapter 10 of Rājaśekharā's Kāyamāmāndya. An earlier description of contest is found in Kāmasūtra 1.4.14–17. It concerns a so-called ghaṭāṅkhandhana, that is, a contest between bards (kṣitilavas), which, however, could equally well be taken to refer to one between kātya poets. The event is announced (it takes place on a day made known, prajñātehāni) and organized by the nāgaraka, the Kāmasūtra's "hero," and it involves performances, or "spectacles" (prabhaṇa), by wandering bards (kṣitilavas... aṅgavah) before an audience of nīyuktas. The latter term is somewhat enigmatic, but from what follows in the text it becomes clear that it refers to people who are well versed in the bardic art themselves. For, if for some reason (illness or a busy schedule) no bards show up, persons from the audience could take over their role. Vice versa, if no audience shows up, the bards, or at least some of them, could take a seat in the audience. The bards get a regular fee on the second day, but may be invited by the audience to perform another time. Interestingly, the guests who have joined the meeting—and most probably the reference is simply to the audience—receive prizes and honors as well. A similar picture arises from the description of the so-called kavisamajā of the Kāvyanīmānāya: the evaluation of the poems is left to an audience, which consists entirely of poets. While the ghaṭāṅkhandhana is presided over by the nāgaraka, the kavisamajā is presided over, and organized, by the king: the meeting takes place at his invitation at his court. The role of the nāgaraka and the king was basically that of distributing presents and honors. On these occasions the court could present itself as a centre of competition, that is, as the place that of all types of people and of all kinds of professions was capable of attracting the most excellent performers.

G. The Proliferation of Genres within the Kātya Tradition

As suggested earlier in this chapter, the mahākāvyas, in any case as far as its format is concerned, was the result of a kind of make-over of the epic. In their use of the epic, the poets were falling back on a literary tradition which was part of their own repertory. As may be gathered from the present form of the Mahabharata and Rāmāyaṇa, the scene of bards dropping in on sacrifices was, as fiction, already a part of these epics as they presumably circulated among ritual specialists and scribes. Therefore, it did not do for the poets to introduce this element of the epic a second time in their mahākāvyas. Interestingly, Kālidāsa in the Rāghuvīmaṇi, in contrast to the Ānandaśāmbhava, by way of introduction did present a poet about to recite the text, while genealogies, or sanjñas, were part of the epic tradition as well. I think this situation underlines, at least in Kālidāsa's time, the difference between the epics, which include genealogies side by side with the main theme, which is sacrifice, on the one hand, and genealogical texts like the Purāṇas, which deal with genealogy as an independent theme. Apart from its story, moreover, the Rāghuvīmaṇi, which shares all the characteristics of a mahākāvyas, such as the division into sargas each with its own meter and different meters at the end of it, seems to show the dominance of the mahākāvyas format in the kātya tradition in Kālidāsa's time.

It has also been argued earlier that in Sanskrit plays the poets were adapting a living performance tradition to the new style of writing developed and maintained by them in the royal chanceries.31 For all we now know this must have

31. The supposed authors' backgrounds in sacrificial (investigative) theory, or mūrtīmānāya referred to earlier (see also n. 28) seems to have left their trace on Sanskrit drama in a particular way. A recurring theme in Sanskrit drama is the king's love affair with a princess and his marriage with her as a second wife beside his first one. Marriage is politically important, as it provides the king with an important ally in the person of the princess's father. What is most striking in all this is the passive role of the king. In the end his desires are fulfilled, one is tempted to say, almost despite himself. The king's desire is the most important thing, its fulfillment happening
H. The Preface

In the course of the history of kātyā certain texts came to be introduced by prefaces. At first sight we seem to be dealing with a relatively late phenomenon, found for the first time in Bāṇa’s Kādambarī and Hararacarita. In the case of Bāṇa’s Hararacarita the preface turns the storyteller in the text into the author of the text. If the function of the preface is indeed, among other things, to introduce an external author, as discussed earlier, in the Hararacarita the problem is that the latter, historical author turns out to be the same person as the storyteller featuring in the text. In this connection I want to draw attention to the prologues of Sanskrit drama. In these prologues the director of the dramatic troupe announces the play that is about to be performed before the audience present. In doing so he also mentions the name of the playwright. However, in the case of the Mṛcchakatīka the author Śūdraka, who is not only responsible for the script of the play but also for that of the prologue, is in that same prologue said to be already dead! The situation in the Mṛcchakatīka may be contrasted with the one in Kālidāsa’s Mālavikāngīrīni. In the case of this play more was needed than a dead author. In the prologue Kālidāsa is expressly said to be a contemporary, living author, which is emphasized by mentioning presumably famous predecessors. As I have tried to show elsewhere, this reference to Kālidāsa as a living person most likely contains a hint at the topic of the play, which, for once, does not involve heroes from epic mythology, but real, historical people. This particular prologue appears to have several elements in common with later prefaces: the name of the author, a reference to earlier authors in the field, and a kind of apology (verse 2). Apparently all this was needed to present a living author. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find out if in Kālidāsa’s time prefaces such as we find later were already in vogue and if in the Mālavikāngīrīni he was playing with the phenomenon, or that we are dealing with a pure coincidence here.

1. Epilogue

If certain Sanskrit compositions were in need of an apology, this is no less the case with the present study. What is presented here is not much more than the outline of an idea. It is basically an attempt to formulate some hypotheses for my own further investigations into the beginnings of kātyā literature. These investigations are to a large extent determined by the idea that kātyā, which started as a by-product of clerks responsible for the king’s correspondence and administration, was in origin written literature exploiting, and experimenting with, the possibilities offered by writing.
In this chapter the clerks' background has been filled in with more details. Thus, it is argued, they appear to have had close contacts with ritual and legal specialists employed at the royal court, if, as a class, they had not themselves evolved from these specialists. As ritual specialists they were the custodians of the epic tradition. Yet, as members of the court administration they must have already been far removed from the wandering bards who used to recite epic poetry at royal sacrifices. As scholars they will have been, or they considered themselves to be, a class apart from these and similar wandering performers, including drama actors.

The scenario mentioned here of the origin of kārya differs from the one drawn up quite recently by Stephanie Jamison. The poetic techniques of kārya and the kārya poets’ “verbal exuberance” are traced back by her directly to the Vedic poetic tradition. The link in the connection was, according to her, the prasasti, or panegyric poetry, which, as the product of kaviśa, had clear roots in the Vedic tradition. Jamison suggests that the typical kārya style had its basis in prasastis and was gradually extended to other genres of kārya, in doing which she has no need of intervening scribes or the epic. As to the intervening scribes, however, I think that their role is demonstrated by the Āsoka inscriptions, which testify to the presence of an element of the later poetical tradition of kārya in the royal chancery. The supposed role of the epic is a more complicated matter, because the first evidence of kārya is Buddhist poetry of the lyric mode in Pāli found in the Theragathā and Theraṇṇa. The latter two texts are generally dated well before the beginning of our era and, as has been demonstrated by Lienhard, show a number of points of agreement with later secular erotic poetry in Pāli (for example, Suttadī and Sanskrit). The Theragathā and Theraṇṇa apart, other early kārya texts all belong to Buddhist literature. They include, apart from stray quotations, Kumāraṇātha’s Kalpanānāma and other early Buddhist cāntās. The first examples of the mabhakātya are Āsāvaghoṣa’s (first century) Buddhacarita and Saumadarananda.

35. Jamison 2007. This is a publication of a series of lectures given at the Collège de France in Paris in 2004. I refer in particular to the end of the third lecture (pp. 115–18) as well as to the fourth lecture (pp. 119–50).

36. Jamison leaves out of consideration elements like the stories of kārya or their protagonists, human and divine, which as found in kārya do not seem to derive directly from the Vedas but seem to have been filtered through the epic (Jamison 1996: 137). In the case of vocabulary the situation is not different. As has been argued by Renou, Vedic words in kārya are not borrowed directly from the Vedas but from the subsequent scholarly tradition represented by the Nighoṣiṇi and Nārāyaṇa; Renou 1959, 389–401.

37. Lienhard 1975. See also Jamison 2006, 143–46, who also draws attention to several instances of the word kārya in Pāli texts.

38. The plays, which can with any certainty be ascribed to Kumāraṇātha’s predecessor Bhasa, namely the Svappamavatasutta and Pratyjakṣyugandharadayaṇa, typically, do not deal with epic themes but with themes belonging to the Udayana cycle (see Tieken 1993 and 1997).


41. On the role of the "foreign" Buddhist rulers in the early history of Sanskrit literature, see Lévi 1902.

42. See Johnston’s introduction to his edition of the Buddhacarita, p. xvi–1.

43. The situation is comparable to the one in the Āsokā inscriptions. In Rock Edict 8 we are told how the emperor visited the place where the Buddha had received enlightenment, a visit, which subsequently greatly affected the king’s administration. In Rock Edict 9, however, heaven (nirvāṇa) is mentioned as the ultimate goal, which besides to popular Buddhism, also belongs to the world of the śrāvaka sacrifice.

44. On the basis of the evidence of the Theragathā and Theraṇṇa, Jamison surmised that “between the Rig Veda and the dawn of kārya proper” the kārya literary tradition had survived at courts, which made use of Middle Indic languages. However, as I have tried to show elsewhere, available evidence for courts using a Middle Indic language needs considerable fine tuning; in both known cases (Āsoka and the Sātavāhanas and their successors in the Deccan) the influence of Sanskrit seems to have been present in the background. Contrary to Jamison’s, in my scenario kārya was in all its phases intimately connected with Sanskrit and in particular with brahmāna culture. Buddhist kārya literature would represent an early offshoot of that tradition, which as far as kārya in Sanskrit is concerned is attested almost simultaneously. The odd-one-out here is the so-called kārya literature in Pāli (in particular Theragathā and Theraṇṇa). In fact, this might be a reason to have a closer look, if not at the date of the compositions then at their interpretation as examples of kārya.

The fact that the earliest examples of mabhakātya are Buddhist texts may well be a trick played by history. In any case, Āsāvaghoṣa’s mabhakātya are full of material derived from, for instance, the epic. As I see it, this may well be explained with reference to the composition and orientation of the chancery concerned, which was probably only marginally affected by Buddhism. For royal rituals, for instance, the king remained dependent on specialists of the śrāvaka ritual because Buddhism did not provide him with alternative royal rituals. Knowledge of Buddhism was probably merely added to the curriculum of the clerks, whose primary schooling included, among other things, Vedic ritual and epic literature. All this might also explain how Buddhist kārya could have
escaped from the ban on pleasurable pastimes such as enjoying literature. We are obviously dealing with a ban which was relevant only in monkish circles and which the court did not feel obliged to obey.

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