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The Structure of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*

Introduction

In his Mahākāvya *Raghuvamśa*¹ Kālidāsa describes the lives and adventures of a number of successive kings belonging to the Ikṣvāku or Solar dynasty. The interpretation of this text has proved problematic in a number of ways. The first problem concerns the apparent lack of unity within the text, which consists of a number of separate episodes connected only by the fact that their heroes belong to the same dynasty. The second problem concerns the striking difference in the length of the descriptions of the respective kings. The description of Rāma alone takes five long chapters (X–XV), while to all 21 kings following Atithi only one relatively short chapter (XVIII) is devoted. Actually, the latter chapter is for the greater part nothing more than a list of names. The third problem is the seemingly abrupt ending of the text at a very critical moment in the narration at the end of chapter XIX: the dynasty threatens to become extinct after king Agnivarṇa has died without leaving a son and heir.

The nature of the final two chapters of the text (XVIII and XIX) has given rise to several rather drastic conclusions, namely that the text of the *Raghuvamśa* in its present form would be incomplete,² that the last two chapters have not been written by Kālidāsa himself,³ and, finally, that this part of the text would actually only be a rough draft.⁴ The first

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1. References are to the edition of A. Scharpé, *Kālidāsa-Lexicon, Vol. I, Basic Text of the Works, Part IV Raghuvamśa*, Rijksuniversiteit te Gent, Werken uitgegeven door de Faculteit van de Letteren en Wijsbegeerte, 134^e aflevering, Brugge, 1964.
 2. E.g., L. Renou, *Kālidāsa, Le Raghuvamśa (La lignée des fils du soleil), Poème en XIX chants, traduit du Sanscrit par L. Renou. Les joyaux de l'Orient. Tome VI*, Paris, 1928, p. X, and H. Jacobi, 'Die Epen Kālidāsa's', *Verhandlungen des 5. internationalen Orientalisten Kongresses, Teil 2, II, 2*, Berlin, 1882, pp. 133–156; esp. p. 150 (*Kleine Schriften, Teil I*, pp. 409–432, esp. p. 427).
 3. Hillebrandt, as quoted by A. B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi, 1970, p. 97, esp. note 1.
 4. A. B. Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

problem noted above, namely that of the absence of a coherent, unified structure, is apparently accepted generally. For instance, according to Warder the intention of Kālidāsa was simply to provide a tableau of examples of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*.⁵

In the following pages some suggestions are put forward for the interpretation of the *Raghuvamśa* precisely as a coherently structured, unified narration, as well as for an appreciation of the peculiarities mentioned above of the final two chapters of the text.

The *vamśa*-theme

In a text which is styled a *vamśa* (genealogy) the presence of the theme of the continuation of the line is an almost necessary condition. In the *Raghuvamśa*, however, this theme features, explicitly and as a serious problem, at the very outset as well as at the very end of the story, thus as it were encompassing or framing the material in between. Below therefore the beginning and the end of the text will be considered more closely.

The first king of the dynasty, Dilīpa,⁶ is married to Sudakṣiṇā. The couple, however, has remained childless, as a result of which the dynasty threatens to become extinct almost before the story has properly started. The cause of the couple's childlessness is revealed to Dilīpa by the sage Vasiṣṭha whom he has consulted on the matter. At some time in the past Dilīpa had failed to honour the heavenly cow Surabhi as he was hastening towards his wife, who had just bathed after her monthly period and with whom it was accordingly his duty to sleep. On account of this Surabhi had passed the curse on him that he would not have any children before he had honoured and served her offspring. Dilīpa himself, however, remained unaware of this curse. Vasiṣṭha suggests to Dilīpa that he honours Surabhi's daughter Nandinī. While the king is faithfully serving Nandinī, this cow is kidnapped by a lion. Dilīpa offers the lion his own body in exchange for Nandinī. This offer is refused, for it appears that the events merely

5. A. K. Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature, Volume Three, The Early Medieval Period. (Sūdraka to Viśākhadatta)*, Delhi, 1977, pp. 130ff.

6. Dilīpa is said to descend from Manu, son of Vivasvat (I, 11-12). The story of the *Raghuvamśa* begins, however, with Dilīpa.

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served to test king Dilīpa's reliability. In return for his reliability he is allowed to make a wish. He asks for a son to be born of his wife. The second chapter ends with the description of the first signs of pregnancy in Sudakṣiṇā, and in the beginning of the third chapter their son Raghu is born.

The problem of producing sons and heirs turns up again further on in the text with Daśaratha, and after him, more or less implicitly, with Rāma, who for a long time was unaware of the existence of his two sons Kuśa and Lava. After Rāma, however, the problem does not occur again for a considerable number of generations. At the same point in the text the pace of the story is considerably quickened. Thus to each of Rāma's immediate successors, Kuśa and Atithi, only one chapter is devoted, while the story of Rāma is described in as many as five. Chapter XVI deals with Kuśa's return to the old capital Ayodhyā, previously deserted by Rāma, and tells how he restores it to its old splendour. Kuśa is succeeded by his son Atithi, who in chapter XVII is extensively described as an ideal king faithful to his *dharma* and being without a rival. Then follows chapter XVIII which hurries through a great part of the genealogy in a mere 53 verses. This list of kings, who up to Dhruvasam̄dhi (the 27th king) are neatly succeeded by their sons, would in this context seem to be a narrative means to indicate that, among other things, the succession took place without any problem.

However, at the very end of the narration the problem raises its head once again. What is interesting here, moreover, is the gradual way in which it is anticipated. The monotony of the list of kings who are each neatly succeeded by their sons is abruptly disturbed by Dhruvasam̄dhi. This king is killed on a hunting expedition by a lion while his son Sudarśana is still only six years old (verse 35). While this child, of whom it is explicitly told that he was the sole continuation of the line (*kulatantum ekam*, verse 36), was not unfit to be made 'lord of Sāketa', the situation remained highly critical until he had reached the age of *yauvana*. When this happy moment has come, at the end of chapter XVIII, the ministers, who desire for their king a faultless progeny (*śuddhasam̄tānakāma*, verse 53), procure for him beautiful princesses.

While Dhruvasam̄dhi died at the time when his son was only a young child, his son's son, Agnivarṇa, dies when the heir to the throne is still, unborn, in his mother's womb.

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Soon after having inherited the throne from his father, Agnivarṇa, who is said to have been raised for enjoyment, leaves the responsibilities of the government to the care of his ministers. He passes his time in the harem in the company of his wives and mistresses. The description of his varied sex-life and of his love-quarrels takes up the greater part of the final chapter. At the end of his eventful life he contracts an incurable disease. One of the symptoms of this disease is a discoloured face, on account of which he has to hide himself from his subjects. The ministers explain his inaccessibility by saying that he was too busy trying to produce a son. Nevertheless, for all his attempts in this matter, he finally dies without progeny (verse 53) and is stealthily cremated. Quickly after, however, a gathering of the most important subjects establishes that Agnivarṇa's wife is pregnant, on which they invest her with royal splendour (*narādhipatiśrī*, verse 55) and have her anointed king (verse 56). The text ends by mentioning that the queen rules justly over the kingdom of her late husband, letting herself be guided by experienced ministers, while her subjects are anxiously waiting for the time of the birth of the child.

It would seem that it is the theme of the continuation of the line which arranges the otherwise diverse and disconnected material into some sort of overall organic whole, giving the text a very definite beginning and end. Moreover, the highly suggestive, prophetic nature of the end of the narration with the pregnancy of the queen is interesting in that it is reminiscent of that of the other epic Kāvya by Kālidāsa, the *Kumārasaṁbhava*. The latter text breaks off with the description of the wedding-night of Śiva and Pārvatī, which is to result in the birth of their son Skanda who will in due time rescue the gods from the threats of the demon Tāraka.⁷

The total number of kings

Interpreted in this way, however, the ending of the *Raghuvamśa* would provide yet another problem, namely concerning the total number of kings mentioned in the text. Most scholars are in fact not very explicit about

7. The interpretation of the *Kumārasaṁbhava* here referred to was first suggested by Jacobi (*op. cit.*). This text, like the *Raghuvamśa*, has long been suspected to be incomplete.

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their number.⁸ A first count, however, yields seven kings for the chapters I–XVII, 21 for chapter XVIII and one for XIX, i.e., 29 in all. The unborn child of Agnivarṇa's wife would thus become the 30th king, making up a full number. This, however, hardly seems in agreement with the ending of the text, which suggests not a completion but a new beginning. A possible solution to this problem is to include Agnivarṇa's wife in the list, though this would mean that for once in this text the succession takes place through a woman and within the same generation. For *de jure* and *de facto* she is a king: in verse 55 she is invested with royal dignity (*narādhīpatiśrī*), in verse 56 she is anointed king (*abhīṣeka*) and in verse 57 she is actually ruling the country.⁹

8. The standard literary histories do not specify the total number of kings. In some editions, however, a chart is provided, as in e.g. *The Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa. With Commentary Sanjīvinī of Mallinātha ... With an Introduction by Prof. H. D. Velankar, Eleventh Edition*, edited ... by Narayanan Ram Acharya, Bombay (Nirnaya Sagar Press), 1948, *Parīṣiṣṭam* 4, which runs from Dilīpa to Agnivarṇa, including a total of 27 kings.

9. The complete list is: 1 Dilīpa, 2 Raghu, 3 Aja, 4 Daśaratha, 5 Rāma, 6 Kuśa, 7 Atithi (Chapters I–XVII), 8 Niṣadha, 9 Nala, 10 Nabhas, 11 Puṇḍarīka, 12 Kṣemadhanvan, 13 Devānīka, 14 Ahīnagu, 15 Pāriyātra, 16 Śīla (or Śāla), 17 Unnābha, 18 Vajranābha, 19 Śāṅkhana, 20 Vyūṣitāśva, 21. Viśvasaha, 22 Hiranyanābha, 23 Kausalya, 24 Brahmiṣṭha, 25 (no name), 26 Puṣya, 27 Dhruvasāmdhi, 28 Sudarśana (Chapter XVIII), 29 Agnivarṇa, 30 Agnivarṇa's wife, 31 Agnivarṇa's unborn son (Chapter XIX).

The exact sources on which Kālidāsa had relied for this list are not known. Parts of the list are found in both the epics, which, however, cease after Rāma and his immediate successors. The two versions found in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, though agreeing among each other, differ considerably from those found in the Purāṇas and in the *Raghuvamśa* (see F. E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, New Delhi, 1962, pp. 90ff.). The list in the *Raghuvamśa* agrees closely with those in the Purāṇas for the part they have in common. Two collated purāṇic versions are found in W. Kirfel, *Das Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa. Versuch einer Textgeschichte*, Leiden, 1927, pp. 334ff. In one of these versions a Dīrghabāhu is mentioned between Dilīpa and Raghu. For Pāriyātra, Śāla (or Śīla) and Unnābha (15–17) are found Pāriyātra, Dala, Bala and Auṅka, on the one hand, and Sudhanvan, Śāla and Uktha, on the other. King Unnābha seems peculiar to the *Raghuvamśa*. The same applies to the sequence Hiranyanābha, Kausalya and Brahmiṣṭha (22–24). The names Hiranyanābha and Kausalya turn up, combined, as the name of a teacher in another *vamśa* edited by Kirfel (*op. cit.*, p. 546, verse 77), while the name Brahmiṣṭha is likewise not otherwise unknown (Kirfel, *op. cit.*, p. 548, verse 86). For the 25th king in Kālidāsa's list no name is given. In the Purāṇas the unborn son of Agnivarṇa listens to the name Śīghra(ka).

The role of Agnivarṇa's wife in fact appears to be of critical importance. She completes the present line, being the 30th king and at the same time by being pregnant of the 31st king furnishes as it were the starting-point for a new beginning. As such she seems to prove once and for all the importance to a king of a *sahadharmacārīṇī*, as she is described in verse 55, that is, a wife who is dedicated to the *dharma*.

The interpretation would agree with the also otherwise moralistic outlook of the text, that is, moralistic not only in the brahmanical but also in the ordinary sense of the word. For instance, Dhruvasaṁdhi endangers the continuation of the dynasty by hunting and Agnivarṇa by an excessive indulgence in harem-life. These are, in fact, two vices which according to Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* should particularly be avoided by a king as they endanger his position.¹⁰

In this context the references to the Aśvamedha sacrifice should be noted as well. This sacrifice plays an important part in some of the episodes. Earlier it was shown how the first king Dilīpa was finally able to secure himself a son and heir, Raghu. After Raghu had grown up into a youth and was appointed *yuvārāja* Dilīpa appoints him in the protection of the horse of the Aśvamedha sacrifice (III, verse 38). The horse, however, is kidnapped by Indra who is afraid that he will be equalled by Dilīpa in the number of sacrifices performed: Indra had performed 100 sacrifices (*Satakratu*) and Dilīpa until that moment only 99. A duel between Raghu and Indra ensues, which the former is in danger of losing. However, Indra, impressed by Raghu's strength, does not insist, but instead grants him a boon, *ā priori* excepting the return of the horse. Raghu requests, and receives, the 'fruit' of the sacrifice for his father.

Another Aśvamedha is performed by Daśaratha, through which this king in his old age succeeds in begetting four sons (X, verses 4-51). The story of the Aśvamedha performed by Rāma is familiar as well. Some time after Rāma had sent away Sītā, who was suspected of infidelity by her husband's subjects, he had let loose a horse for the Aśvamedha (XV, verse 58). He

10. R. P. Kangle, *The Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra, Part I, A Critical Edition with a Glossary, University of Bombay Studies, Sanskrit, Prakrit and Pali, no. 1, Bombay, 1969 (second edition), 8, 3, 38-42.*

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himself stayed behind in the company of a gold effigy of Sītā. While the sacrifice goes on, Kuśa and Lava, of whose existence he had hitherto been unaware, appear and are recognized by Rāma as his sons. Rāma is reunited with their mother Sītā, who in the act of proving her innocence is taken up by the earth. The Aśvamedha, as in the epic itself, is, however, concluded with success (XV, verse 86). The last king of the line who in the *Raghuvamśa* is explicitly said to have performed the Aśvamedha sacrifice is Atithi (XVII, verse 76).

The important place in the text of the Aśvamedha sacrifice is in itself interesting as it supports the traditional association of the poet Kālidāsa with the Guptas of the fourth and the fifth century A.D. These kings prided themselves on stimulating the revival of old, for the most part obsolete vedic rituals, one of which is the Aśvamedha.¹¹ For instance, in the Allahabad pillar inscription Samudra Gupta (335-376 A.D.) is referred to as one who restored the Aśvamedha sacrifice that had long been in abeyance.¹² That same king issued coins on which is depicted a sacrificial horse for the Aśvamedha.¹³ Kumāra Gupta I (415-455 A.D.) issued a similar type of coins and assumed the epithet Aśvamedhamahendra.¹⁴

In the *Raghuvamśa* the 'court poet' Kālidāsa thus connects his patrons with the epic-mythological line of Raghu which managed to survive into an indefinite future by its valour, its adherence to the brahmanical code and, we are to believe, by the performances of the Aśvamedha sacrifice. The same future is by implication professed for the Guptas.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion it would follow that the last two chapters of the *Raghuvamśa* form an integral part of the text. It has been suggested that the peculiar contents of chapter XVIII, which is for the most part a mere genealogical list, is part of a, rather extreme, narrative

11. A. K. Narain, 'Religious Policy and Toleration in Ancient India with particular reference to the Gupta Age', in Bardwell L. Smith, *Essays on Gupta Culture*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 17-51, esp. p. 34.

12. A. K. Narain, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

13. A. K. Narain, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

14. A. K. Narain, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

scheme, which should be taken as an indication that there simply was not much to tell concerning the members of the list. Furthermore, it has been argued that the open ending of the text is in fact a kind of prophesy such as is also found in the *Kumārasāmbhava*. All this shows Kālidāsa as an important innovator in the Mahākāvya-tradition, however misunderstood by later generations. For while he drew most of his material from mythology and from the epics, he at the same time broke away from the explicit, epic tradition of story-telling, which can still be seen in the works of his predecessor Aśvaghōṣa, the *Buddhacarita* and the *Saundarananda*. With Kālidāsa the overall structure and the way of telling have themselves become important elements in the meaning of the narration.