

COMPOSITION AND SPREAD OF THE SKANDAPURĀṆA



Tableau de la troupe

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An Artist's Impression

Concluding Lecture of VVIK Indologendag 2013
'The Study of the History of Hinduism in the Sanskrit Tradition'

by

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Leiden, 28 September 2013

मित्राणि!

अपारे काव्यसंसारे कविरेकः प्रजापतिः ।

यथास्मै रोचते विश्वं तथेदं परिवर्तते ॥

Friends, if you will permit me, let me be that *kavi* today. Allow me to take advantage of this unique occasion to read an essay in the indicative mood. No modal auxiliaries: neither ‘would’ nor ‘should’; neither ‘may’ nor ‘could.’ In other words, a thoroughly unscholarly exposition, but a, hopefully light, and delightfully careless artist’s impression, which puts ‘how beautiful it may have been, possibly’ into an apodictic style: ‘so beautiful it was, definitely.’ After all, an artist’s impression is, according to the infallible Wikipedia, ‘the representation of a scene created by an artist, when no other accurate representation is available.’

So it came to pass,

When Avantivarman ascended the Maukhari throne in Kanyakubja in the last quarter of the sixth century, it may have appeared as if the old days of stability and prosperity had returned to Madhyadeśa. Thanks to the incessant war efforts of his grandfather, Īśānavarman, the cruel intruders called Hūṇas had been driven back to the foothills of the western Himālayas after a long and devastating period of war. A close friendship had developed between the rulers in Kanyakubja and Sthāneśvara, where the dynasty of the Vardhanas guarded the western part of the kingdom. The eastern enemies, the Gauḍas and their allies the Guptas, had been forced to take refuge at the borders of the ocean, where they were being kept in check by Kanyakubja’s powerful southern allies in Dakṣiṇa Kosala, who traced their respectable pedigree straight back to Pāṇḍu and his mighty son Arjuna.

The ancient land of the Buddha and the cradle of empire was firmly under control. Avantivarman proudly bore the title ‘sovereign of Magadhā.’ A Buddhist settlement there was developing into a place of learning of high international repute. The university of Nālandā attracted students and scholars from all over India and abroad, and the Maukhari king, though not a Buddhist, prided himself on being its chancellor.

The monarch watched over the bull of the Dharma, which was shepherded by his countrymen. The bull, shown on the royal seal, had in recent years become a forceful emblem, a symbol appropriated by another religion, one to which the Maukharis had confessed ever since they had thrown off the yoke of the imperial Guptas with their state deity Viṣṇu. Worship of Śiva had opened up new avenues for the imagination.

Though familiar with all sorts of asceticism, Northern India in the sixth century saw a new type of strange sādhus travelling around, who smeared themselves with ashes and imitated the god of their devotion, Śiva Paśupati. A lineage of gurus pertaining to this movement had settled in Kanyakubja, an establishment founded in the capital by a saint from Kurukṣetra, the ancient battlefield, now firmly under the control of the friendly Vardhanas or Puṣyabhūti, who themselves had become staunch followers of this type of religion. Avantivarman, too, was well disposed towards them and invited some of them to his court.

The Pāśupatas, as these Śiva worshippers were called, made good use of the patronage that fell to their lot. They set up religious centres (*sthāna*), temples (*āyatana*) and monasteries (*maṭha*) in the country’s most hallowed places, such as the Kapālasthāna in Kurukṣetra, Bhadrēśvara near Gaṅgādvāra, the great Deva temple, *āyatana*, in Prayāga, and the *siddhasthāna*, ‘home of the saints,’ called Madhyameśvara, *circa* one kilometer north of the renowned cremation grounds of Avimukta or Vārāṇasī.

A network of itinerant sādhus connected these centres, which became well integrated with the local religious infrastructure and developed into junctions within a fabric of yogins and religious teachers. The Pāśupatas had had a good look at their Buddhist counterparts and had copied their formula for success, namely a standing organisation of professional religious specialists—yogins, ascetics, and *ācāryas*—supported by a following of ordinary devotees, the Māheśvara community at large, to whose spiritual needs it catered. One of the peculiar facilities offered to the community of *laukikas*, by at least some of these Pāśupata ascetics, was to extend services in and around the cremation grounds. Living in the cremation ground was a highly acclaimed strategy within Pāśupata asceticism. Mahākāla in Ujjain, Avimukteśvara in Benares, Paśupatinātha in Nepal, to mention just the best known, were run by Pāśupatas and

became key to their success.

Avantivarman, therefore, acted in tune with the spirit of his time when he supported the movement. Earlier his uncle Sūryavarman had spent large sums on the rebuilding of a dilapidated temple of the ‘Foe of Andhaka,’ whose images were beginning to appear around this time. The prince had hired a poet to sing the praises of the god as well as of himself, chiselled into stone, for everyone to read:

MAY that figure of Andhaka’s Foe, on whose body snakes glimmer, offer you a stable abode—a figure who wears a lion skin that is slightly crimsoned by the light of the jewel in the hood of the serpent that is his sacred thread, and who reddens the white line of skulls that is the chaplet by the radiance from his third eye, and who bears on his crest the slender, darkness dispelling digit of the moon.

HE (the prince) had youth that was beautiful like the waxing moon and dear to all the world; he was at peace and his mind was devoted to reflection on the branches of learning; he had mastered fully (all) the arts; it was as if Lakṣmī (fortune), Kīrti (fame) and Sarasvatī (learning), among others, vied with one another for his patronage: in the world, women in love experience the feeling (of love) all the more, if their lover is beloved.

Poets were held in high esteem and Avantivarman invited them to his court. Imagine the glamorous world in which plays like the *Mudrārākṣasa* were staged, attended by the playwright Viśākhadatta in person, or the *Kaumudīmahotsava*, to mention another play, in which the entrance of the ruler himself is announced:

A SON of the House of Magadhā has arrived, thronged by hundreds of eminent ministers, like the moon enhanced by an aureole of stars, that prince, who is a feast for the eyes of his delighted subjects.

This is the world in which Sanskrit flourished, the world in which the *kavi* Bhatsu, Bāṇa’s respected teacher, was honoured by crowned heads. This court was sustained by the inhabitants of Kanyakubja who, in the words of the famous Chinese pilgrim Hsuien-tsang, were ‘honest and sincere, noble and gracious in appearance, clothed in ornamented and bright-shining fabrics,’ inhabitants who ‘applied themselves much to learning, and in their travels were very much given to discussion on religious subjects, whereas the fame of their pure language was far spread.’¹ To this court the leading figures of the community of Māheśvaras were also welcomed. Sanskrit was their language and in Sanskrit they composed their learned treatises and witty mythology.

1 Si-yu-ki I, 206f.

For learned treatises and religious expositions the educated classes of northern India looked to Vārāṇasī. This trading town on the River Ganges had emerged under the Guptas in the preceding century as a centre of traditional Hindu learning. The arrival of the Pāśupata movement added to its reputation for holiness, whereas the collective Sanskrit learning of the town added to the literary achievements of the Māheśvaras.

The composition of the two classic Sanskrit epics was closed by the fourth century. Some of the new religious ideas concerning the god Śiva had still made it into the latest layers of the *Mahābhārata*. After the *Rāmāyaṇa* had been completed, mythology related to the tutelary deity of the Gupta Empire, Viṣṇu, and his popular manifestation of Kṛṣṇa in particular, had found expression in an Appendix to the great epic, the *Harivaṃśa*, as well as in a new type of Sanskrit text styled ‘Ancient Lore,’ i.e. Purāṇa.

The Purāṇa as a literary genre in its first stages of development dealt with the creation of the universe, the origin of the world and its royal dynasties. However, as for instance the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* had shown, the genre also lent itself perfectly to the circulation of popular, religious and mythological material. After the civilized world had recovered from a period of devastating wars and invasions, and now that Viṣṇu had ceded his place of prominence to Śiva, the sixth century embraced a new form of devotion. The time had come to collect the mythology of the Great God. In the words of the *Skandapurāṇa*: ‘having heard the story of *Bhārata* as well as the Ancient Lore, we wish to hear about the birth of Śiva’s son, Kārttikeya.’

A senior brahmin member of the Māheśvara community in Vārāṇasī, well-versed in Sanskrit literature, an expert on the epic tradition, initiated in the Pāśupata sacred texts, in short, a brahmin with great prestige among his fellow believers, charismatic and dynamic, that man, let us call him the Sūta, took the initiative to fulfill this wish and to compose a Purāṇa text that would do justice to the rich mythology of Śiva and his family, that would be accessible to the whole community, and, last but not least, that would validate local claims of the sanctity of holy places and religious establishments by telling their Māhātmyas. In order to possess this authority, the text should be in the anonymous, pseudohistoric style of the Purāṇa, reportedly spoken by a sage of yore with intimate knowledge of the Great God’s own thoughts and deeds.

It happened in the days of Avantivarman’s reign that a group of kindred spirits and literary talents convened in an institution of the community in Benares. They discussed the plan and pledged their commitment. The Sūta, the editor-in-chief, began his composition in Śloka verses, while

an inventory was being agreed on of the myths, stories, topics and places that had to be treated in the course of the work, a narrative that was designed to lead to the birth, consecration and heroic deeds of Kārttikeya, but should not reach that point before an extensive cycle of Andhaka myths had been told first—Andhaka who, like the Mleccha foes of the Maukharis, could not be slain until after an endless series of battles.²

The materials were arranged in a preliminary order in versified form. This inventory or blueprint, Anukramaṇikā as it was called, has survived and come down to us in the second *adhyāya* of the *Skandapurāṇa*. The editor-in-chief was assisted by some editors who were assigned specific portions of the composition. The Pāśupata network was called in to assemble information about places sacred to the Māheśvara community. Sometimes this resulted in new collaborators entering the group, bringing in local knowledge couched in Māhātmya-style texts, sometimes the editor himself used the information to compose the story. Rarely were ready-made texts taken from existing literature. The Sūta guaranteed the unity of literary style and the quality of the Sanskrit, but this could not prevent minor differences remaining. He also took great care that the arrangement of stories, the complex narrative structure of the text, remained consistent and logical. However, soon it appeared that the original blueprint could not be implemented except in broad outline; the myths and stories composed had too powerful a dynamic of their own to link up with each other perfectly. Here the genius of the Sūta was most needed and he did a brilliant job.³

The Pāśupata network was strongest along the east-west axis, Vārāṇasī–Kanyakubja–Kurukṣetra. It had been decided to begin in the west, since it was one of the underlying aims of the work to cover, or rather to recover the entire landscape of northern India, transforming it into sacred space, a landscape on which the deeds of the Great God and his entourage had bestowed holiness at the beginning of time. The work was well under way—the myths relating to Kurukṣetra and the Sarasvatī, Sthāneśvara, Bhadreśvara and Kanakhala, and Vārāṇasī itself had been composed, and the Vindhyaṅgī Cycle was drafted—when political reality threatened to disrupt the literary activity. A joint attack from the east and the south-west brought to an end the rule of the Maukharis, just when Graharman had succeeded his father Avantivarman, while that of its allies in Thanesar was shaking on its foundations. For a while Benares came under the control of the easterners, the Gaudas.

2 SP_{Bh} 130–56.

3 An illustration of this intricate process is the inclusion of the legend of the seven brahmins into the Vindhyaṅgī Cycle, for which see Yokochi's *Introduction* SP III, 15–22.

A young prince, a *kumāra* from Sthāneśvara, installed as chief of the army on the banks of the Sarasvatī, as it were the embodiment of Skanda himself, came to the rescue of the kingdom of Kanyakubja. In a war that lasted several years, Harṣavardhana succeeded in pushing the Gauḍas under their king ‘Moon,’ Śaśāṅka, back across the rivers Soṇa and Gaṇḍakī.

In about AD 606, the political situation had stabilized enough to organize a magnificent royal coronation ceremony. Harṣavardhana was enthroned in Kanyakubja. It would take Harṣa six more years, however, to consolidate his sovereignty over the combined hereditary lands of the Vardhanas and Maukharis, including Magadhā, and before finally, to paraphrase the closing metaphor of *Harṣa’s Deeds* sung by the greatest writer of the time, Bāṇa—‘after a day of bloody contest, at the fall of night, the Fame of his House, the Glory of his Rule, and the Force of his Destiny, united to hand over to him a pale-looking Moon.’

Vārāṇasī was back in the kingdom of Kanyakubja, but the new political situation had an effect on the perspective and scope of the composition in progress.

To begin with, the historical consecration of a young prince (*kumāra*) on the banks of the Sarasvatī to lead an army against the Gauḍa king ‘Moon’ (*śaśāṅka*), reflected the mythology of Skanda, the main subject of the Purāṇa—Skanda, the god of war, who, after his consecration as *senāpati* on the banks of the same river, led the Devas against the Asuras in order to destroy the demon king ‘Star’ (*tāraka*).⁴ The composers decided to bring their work to the attention of King Harṣavardhana, soliciting his blessing. After all, Harṣa himself confessed to be a *paramamāheśvara*, and his court offered a venue to the most promising literary men of the country, among whom was the king himself.

Secondly, the king’s military successes against Gauḍa called attention to the east, bringing a Śaiva settlement in western Gauḍa within the purview of the composers. The Sūta, or his successor, made the decision to conclude the sanctification of the sacred landscape of northern India in Koṭivarṣa, an important commercial and religious centre in the province of Puṇḍra, which was situated 80 km north-east of the army camp of King Harṣa on the Lower Ganges, the camp where the king would eventually meet the Chinese pilgrim. The concluding chapters of the Purāṇa were reserved for philosophy and an exposition of Pāśupata yoga, which, along with devotion and pilgrimage, would bring the Māheśvara, yogin and layman alike, to paradise, the City of Śiva at the top of the universe.

4 SP_{Bh} 163–65.

The day arrived when the composition of the Purāṇa was concluded and the text could be copied into a carefully prepared book, a *pustaka*, that could be offered to the Great God and donated to the king and the community of the Māheśvaras. As usual when a work of such magnitude was completed, a solemn occasion had to be found when parts of the work could be recited and the book could be consecrated and ritually entrusted to a temple. Such an occasion was King Harṣa's 'arena of charitable offerings,' a spectacular event that was staged every five years at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā. The great *āyatana* or temple of Deva there would be an excellent repository.

The permission was obtained. In the middle of Harṣa's reign, when he was at the pinnacle of power, a great assembly of feudatories, Śramaṇas, and Brahmins, convened in Kanyakubja around the beginning of the New Year, in preparation of the quinquennial event. The procession to Prayāga and the festivities there were part of the Festival of Spring in the month of Caitra. The king rode on his magnificent elephant Darpaśāta towards Prayāga, scattering pearls and other riches, while dressed as Indra. His mobile court offered splendid opportunities for staging theatrical productions, first and foremost, of course, those of his own. The Sūtradhāra in the *Ratnāvalī* and *Priyadarśikā* introduces Harṣa's plays:

Today, on the occasion of the Spring Festival, I have been respectfully called by the assembly of kings, which has convened from all quarters of the world, and which is subservient to the lotus-feet of King Śrī-Harṣadeva. I have been addressed as follows: 'We have heard by hearsay that a play entitled *Ratnāvalī*, which is embellished by an unprecedented arrangement of the material, was composed by our lord Śrī-Harṣa, but we have not yet seen it performed.'

The play turned out to be a great success, and would stand the test of time. But Harṣavardhana was too great a king to hear only his own voice. A date for the first recitation of the *Skandapurāṇa* was agreed on. The Sūta and his team were offered their platform. In order to sustain the illusion of its being a work from time immemorial, an essential feature of the genre of Ancient Lore, a professional reader, a *pustakavācaka*, was asked to recite it. The first presentation of the work went ahead before an audience including the king, courtiers, sādhus, monks, literati of all sorts, pandits and a selection of educated Māheśvaras. It was a great *tamāśā*, going by the consolidated words of the Sūta and his fellow *kavi*, Bāṇa:

The sages, assembling in Prayāga to bathe in the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā on the day of full moon, see the Singer of Ancient Lore coming towards them to pay his respects.

Dressed in white silk made in Puṇḍra, his forehead marked by a *tilaka* consisting of lines of orpiment on a white clay coating, his topknot ornamented by a small bunch of flowers, his lips reddened by betel, and his eyes beautified by lines of collyrium, he takes his seat and begins his performance.

He pauses for a moment before he places, on a desk made of reed stalks that is put in front of him, a *pustaka*, which, although its wrapping has been removed by that time, is still wrapped, as it were, in the halo of his nails, which shine softly like the fibres of a lotus.

They ask him about the birth of Kārttikeya, a story that equals the *Mahābhārata* and surpasses the *Purāṇa*, both of which he had recited in the Naimiṣa forest on the occasion of a *brahmasattra*.

Then, while he assigns two places behind him to two flautists, Madhukara, 'the bee,' and Pārāvata, 'the turtle-dove,' his close associates, he turns over the frontispiece, takes a small bundle of folios, and announces the story of the birth of Skanda, of his friendliness towards brahmins, his glory and his heroism, greater than that of the gods.

By his chanting he enchants the hearts of his audience with sweet intonations, evoking as it were, the tinkling of the anklets of Sarasvatī, as she presents herself in his mouth, while it seems as if, by the sparkling of his teeth, he whitewashes the ink-stained syllables and worships the book with showers of white flowers.⁵

The performance received favourable reactions. After having done their ritual duties, attended the great potlatch ceremony at the confluence, and paid obeisance to the Great God in his temple and the king in his court, the Sūta and his entourage returned to Vārāṇasī. More copies of the book were produced. Small emendations were made and the first transcriber's faults slipped in. The different versions of the text were born.

The subsequent transmission and distribution of the *Purāṇa* over various centres of the Māheśvaras added more flaws. The copying took place in focal points of Sanskrit learning, to the west and the east of Vārāṇasī. In Magadhā, some Pāśupata *ācāryas* were not entirely satisfied with the text. They missed in particular an account of the Lakulīśa tradition in their own country, and, in general, they felt that the holy places in the east and in the north, in Magadhā, Orissa and Nepal, had not been done justice. They decided to amend this shortcoming by inserting an additional list of *tīrthas* in an *adhyāya* that appeared to be the right place for it.⁶

While these processes were underway, the political situation in India changed dramatically. What a few years earlier had still seemed far away

5 This is a coalescence of two passages, SP 1.4–13 and HC 3 p. 137f.

6 SP_S 167.163–87.

or downright impossible, happened. Harṣa's empire collapsed. Chaos prevailed all over northern India, whereas the north-east was confronted by a military invasion from Nepal and Tibet.

Magadhā was the first country in which order was restored under the authority of the dynasty of the Later Guptas. The daughter of Āditya-gupta married the Maukhari prince Bhogavarman, a wise move, contributing significantly to political stability. And while the kingdoms of Kanyakubja, Puṇḍra and Kāmarūpa were still in disarray, the Gupta House of Magadhā consolidated its power further by re-establishing good relations with its northern neighbour, the Licchavi kingdom of Nepal. A daughter born of the marriage with the Maukhari prince, Vatsadevī, was married off to the Licchavi king Śivadeva.

During the last two decades of the seventh century, relations with Nepal became close and cultural exchange between the two countries intensified. Pāśupata yogins and *ācāryas* wandered from Magadhā into Nepal to visit the great shrine of Paśupatinātha, which had developed into a state sanctuary and received substantial financial support from Vatsadevī and her Nepalese husband. The priesthood of this temple was firmly in the hands of a local branch of Pāśupatas. They were happy with the growing reputation of their temple. It brought them pilgrims from afar and their coffers filled accordingly. At the same time the intensive traffic kept them up-to-date with new religious developments and informed about the latest literary productions.

Thus the reputation of the *Skandapurāṇa* spread to Nepal, and friends in Magadhā were asked for a copy. They brought one, naturally a manuscript that contained the insertion mentioning Paśupatinātha in Nepāla. The new acquisition was treasured. In order to preserve the text, the manuscript was copied in the century that followed. And so it happened that on the twelfth day of the bright half of the month of Caitra in the year 234 (= AD 810/11) a scribe in Nepal could complete his work on the *Skandapurāṇa*, a labour that he had undertaken for the sake of the perfection of all beings. It would become our manuscript S₁. And, if it has not contributed to our perfection, we are certainly the only ones to blame.

I began my talk today with a quote from Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*: 'In the boundless universe of literature the author alone is god. In it the world revolves as per his liking.'⁷ The scenario presented is indeed to my liking, but as you have, no doubt, understood, it is just one possible scenario among others. I hope that the reader can appreciate it for what it is and will not lose sight of its highly speculative nature. Nevertheless

7 Ānandavardhana: *Dhvanyāloka* 3.42.

it is the most plausible one that I can come up with after twenty years of study of the text and context of the *Skandapurāṇa*. It was a work of the *longue durée*, too long for modern adepts of bibliometrics, but not so for building a dedicated team of fellow students. A day like this proves that I am right at least in that respect.

Western indologists usually leave the pre-modern history of the Indian subcontinent to their Indian colleagues. For this there are no good arguments, especially not, if we realize that classical Indian culture and religion cannot be fully comprehended without situating them in their proper historical and geographical context. I am fortunate in having two friends who share this view with me. Michael Willis, the very active curator of South Asia at the British Museum, and Ellen Raven, just as active, working in this university. Walking together in the field, or down in the storage rooms of the BM, Michael has always surprised me with cute and innovative insights. They have influenced my view of Gupta India to no small degree.

Without Ellen and her work I would have been a blind man in another field, one which forms a most important source of early Indian history and iconography, numismatics. Not only has Ellen opened my eyes for the beauty of the Gupta coinage, she has also always found time to answer my many queries and has been willing to help me out with splendid photos from her incredible database of Indian coins. But maybe most importantly, Ellen's scholarly cautiousness and meticulousness has often kept me from rash conclusions. As a pair, if I may say so, Michael and Ellen are a student-of-Indian-history's best friends.

Our study of the *Skandapurāṇa* has been team work from the early nineties of the last century. It is entirely to the credit of Haru Isaacson and Rob Adriaensen that this project got off the ground. Rob had been my mainstay and support from my college days. His spirit lives on in all we do until this very moment. And just as great a privilege it has been to have Haru among my students and soon as an superb colleague and team member. The critical edition of the *Skandapurāṇa* as it has crystallized over the long years of intensive collaboration is unthinkable without his genius.

One of the wonders of my career has been that time and again generations of students showed the interest, capacity, and stamina to join our work on the world of the Purāṇa. Yuko Yokochi, Peter Bisschop and Natasja Bosma, you have brought the *kalpavṛkṣa* into blossom. Without your studies hardly a word of what I have said this afternoon could have been spoken. To quote an old love of mine, Aristotle: 'In the case of all things which have several parts and in which the whole is not, as it were, a mere heap, but the totality is something besides the parts, there is a

cause of unity; [...].⁸ This cause of unity, I would like to argue, is the form (εἶδος) of scholarship that you embody. I am deeply obliged.

Concluding, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Friends of the Kern Institute, the University of Leiden, and today's organizers, Alied de Cock, Ellen Raven and Peter Bisschop, and to all of you, whose presence has made this event unforgettable.

8 Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, VIII 1045a 8–11. Translation W.D. Ross. Πάντων γὰρ ὅσα πλείω μέρη ἔχει καὶ μὴ ἔστιν ὅϊον σωρὸς τὸ πᾶν ἀλλ' ἔστι τι τὸ ὅλον παρὰ τὰ μέρη, ἔστι τι αἴτιον, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐν τοῖς σώμασι τοῖς μὲν ἀφ' αἰτίας τοῦ ἐν εἶναι τοῖς δὲ γλισχρότης ἢ τι πάθος ἕτερον τοιοῦτον.