

PŪRVĀPARAPRAJÑĀBHINANDANAM
EAST AND WEST, PAST AND PRESENT

**Indological and Other Essays
in Honour of Klaus Karttunen**

EDITED BY

BERTIL TIKKANEN & ALBION M. BUTTERS

STUDIA ORIENTALIA 110

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ARCHETYPES AND BOTTLENECKS: REFLECTIONS ON THE TEXT HISTORY OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

Johannes Bronkhorst

1. ARCHETYPES AND AUTOGRAPHS

Most Sanskrit texts reach us in the form of manuscripts. These manuscripts are more or less remote descendants of presumably one earliest manuscript, written by the original author or redactor of the text concerned. This earliest manuscript is called the autograph. It is only in exceptional cases that we possess autographs of Sanskrit texts (i.e. the original manuscript written by the original author or redactor himself). In the vast majority of cases, all we have are copies of copies of copies of the original autograph. This is especially true of ancient texts, texts whose date of composition is too far removed from the present for manuscripts from that period to have survived.

Philologists have developed ways to get as close as possible to lost autographs with the help of the manuscripts that *have* survived. In order to do so they make intelligent use of the variants that always pop up in lineages of manuscripts. Each time a text is copied, the new manuscript will contain some mistakes, usually small ones, but also sometimes additions or modifications that the copying scribes have knowingly and willingly introduced. Over the centuries this can lead to separate branches of manuscripts. A careful consideration of these branches, and of the ways in which they differ from each other, makes it sometimes possible to reconstruct the common ancestor of all surviving manuscripts. This common ancestor of all surviving manuscripts (or of all manuscripts used for a certain edition) is called their archetype.

Only in the case of a limited number of Sanskrit texts has it been possible to reconstruct the archetype of all or of a substantial number of surviving manuscripts. To some extent this is due to the fact that there are not enough scholars. Making a so-called critical edition – preferably with a “stemma” (genealogical tree) of manuscripts and a reconstructed archetype – requires a substantial amount of work and great skill. Worse, many texts do not allow of such a recon-

struction: their manuscripts do not belong to clearly separable lineages. This is most often due to the fact that an important number of scribes did not use just one manuscript each to copy from, but several. The surviving manuscripts are then “contaminated”, making disentanglement of the different strands of manuscripts well-nigh impossible.

I will concentrate here on a few texts whose manuscripts *do* allow us to say something about the archetype from which they are descended. I will show that the archetype is often different from the autograph. Indeed, the distance in time between autograph and archetype of surviving manuscripts *can* be considerable, meaning centuries or more.

1.1 *Vākyapadīya*

Let us, to begin with, consider a text from the fifth century CE, the *Vākyapadīya* of Bhartṛhari. This text has been admirably edited by the German scholar Wilhelm Rau. Rau even succeeded in establishing a stemma relating the manuscripts that were used. This stemma is almost too neat to be true. Certainly it has few, if any, parallels in editions of other Indian texts. At present we are interested in the archetype it reconstructs. This, it turns out, is not the original text written down by Bhartṛhari, but rather a mixture of Bhartṛhari’s original text and some portions of an early commentary. As a matter of fact, the concluding verses of the second chapter in Rau’s edition are in reality the concluding verses of the commentary known by the name *Vṛtti*, probably composed by someone else, perhaps a student of Bhartṛhari. Here, then, we see that the archetype of the surviving manuscripts is not identical with Bhartṛhari’s autograph of the *Vākyapadīya*.¹

1.2 *Mahābhāṣya*

My second example is an early grammatical commentary, the so-called *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali. This text dates from the second half of the second century BCE. We have neither a critical edition of this text nor stemma of manuscripts, but we do have an edition that has been produced from a fair number of manuscripts. It has been possible to show that all these manuscripts share some mistakes in Vedic quotations that can only have come about around the year 1000 CE in northern India. It follows that these mistakes must belong to the archetype underlying all these manuscripts. This archetype can therefore be

¹ Bronkhorst (1988: 111).

dated around the year 1000 CE at the earliest. It is separated from the autograph by a period of eleven centuries or more!²

There is an explanation for this state of affairs. As in the case of the *Vākyapaḍīya* of Bhartṛhari, a commentary appears to play a crucial role. Around the year 1000 CE in northern India, someone called Kaiyaṭa composed a commentary on the *Mahābhāṣya*, which would become the most popular and the most widely studied commentary on this text. Along with this commentary, subsequent scribes apparently adopted the *Mahābhāṣya* readings it accepted. Other lineages of manuscripts were henceforth neglected, so much so that, as far as we know, not a trace of them has survived until today.³

In both of these examples it is possible to think in terms of a bottleneck: of all the manuscripts that existed, only one became the ancestor of all those that survived (or have been taken into consideration). However, neither in the case of the *Vākyapaḍīya* nor the *Mahābhāṣya* do we have reason to think that only a few manuscripts *existed* at the time of the archetype. Quite on the contrary, there may have been many manuscripts in existence during the creation of the one manuscript that would become the archetype of all manuscripts extant today. Seen this way, there may have been no real bottleneck.

1.3 Paippalāda Saṃhitā

Some texts may have gone through a *real* bottleneck in the sense that few manuscripts existed at certain points in their history. An example may be found in the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā* of the *Atharva Veda*. The manuscripts of this text, preserved in both Kashmir and Orissa, go back to one written archetype from around 800–1000 CE in Gujarat. This, at any rate, is the theory presented by Michael Witzel (1985), who offers the following explanatory hypothesis: For many centuries Brahmins of the *Atharva Veda* were centered in Gujarat, whence some were invited from time to time by kings in other parts of India. They arrived with their texts (i.e. the version of the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā* current in Gujarat). Other traditions of that text either did not exist or were overshadowed by the originally Gujarati tradition. In other words, it is possible that only a small number of manuscripts of the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā* existed in that period. Here we can speak of a real bottleneck.

² Witzel (1986).

³ Bronkhorst (1987).

1.4 Mānava Dharmasāstra

In order to illustrate another point, I wish to consider the *Mānava Dharmasāstra*, better known in the English speaking world by the name *Laws of Manu*. A critical edition of this text has recently been prepared, which does not however include a stemma showing the relationship between the manuscripts. The editor of this edition, Patrick Olivelle, nonetheless presents arguments to show that this work is essentially a unitary composition created by a single author. That is to say, there was once an autograph of the *Laws of Manu*. Yet this autograph is not identical with the archetype of all presently available manuscripts. Indeed, Olivelle shows that there are a number of passages in the text which are clearly later additions, which were added some time after the autograph and before this archetype. The *Laws of Manu* is in this way similar to the texts discussed earlier (cf. the *Vākyapaḍīya*, the *Mahābhāṣya*, the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā*). In all of these cases, archetype and autograph are separated from each other by some interval of time, occasionally even considerable intervals of time.

The case of the *Laws of Manu* is different in another respect, however. Unlike the other texts, this one was added to regularly. This is probably explained by the type of text it is. Being a Dharmasāstra, a lawbook of sorts, it almost invited accretions: new portions dealing with rules applicable to specific situations that were not dealt with (or insufficiently so) in the original text. This process of accretions continued even after the time of the archetype, as is clear from the addition of individual verses and minor changes in the wording of verses detectable through “lower criticism”.⁴

Note that the conclusion that in the case of Manu autograph and archetype are different is based on an assessment of the relative coherence or lack of it in portions of the text. This is obviously a dangerous argument. We know that Christians over the ages have succeeded in finding coherence between the books of the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament. This presents a good example of the danger of assessing coherence and incoherence. In spite of this, we often depend upon such an assessment, and I do believe that Olivelle has by and large done a good job.

One more remark before we leave Manu. There is no compelling reason to assume that the accretions to this text during the period between autograph and archetype were all added in one go. It is easy to imagine that subsequent generations of scribes contributed bits and pieces to one lineage of manuscripts. This process might have gone on until today had it not been for the fact that a certain

4 Olivelle (2005: 51).

manuscript of that lineage happened to become the archetype of the now surviving manuscripts. The production of the archetype should not therefore be thought of as a special event during which a new edition of the text was consciously created. It is much more likely that the scribe who wrote the archetype had no idea that he was engaged in such a momentous enterprise. We may compare the situation with that of mitochondrial Eve, who is identified by biologists as the maternal ancestor of all women alive today. This woman was not aware of her role in history, nor did any of her contemporaries see anything distinctive about her. The archetype of all surviving manuscripts of a text may similarly be just a manuscript with special status assigned to it by subsequent history.⁵

2. ARCHETYPE AND AUTOGRAPH IN THE CASE OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

These preliminary remarks have prepared us for an inspection of the *Mahābhārata*, a text that is even more susceptible to accretions than the *Laws of Manu*. This is evident from the fact that this epic survives in different versions in different parts of India: these versions differ from each other primarily in the portions that have been added to an original kernel.

In the first place, the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* is the edition of the parts that all these different *Mahābhāratas* have in common. That is to say, an important aspect of the preparation of this Critical Edition was the removal of accretions. The remaining text that underlies these different versions presumably corresponds to the archetype of the surviving manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata*.

The question which has now to be addressed is: is this archetype identical with the autograph, or are the two different from each other? I use the term autograph, even though I am well aware that this is a dubious term to use in connection with a text like the *Mahābhārata*. Scholars tend to agree that some form of the *Mahābhārata* was committed to writing during the last one or two centuries preceding the Common Era. This earliest written form of the *Mahābhārata* may have been based on even earlier material, but that is not an issue that interests us at present.⁶ Here it is sufficient to agree, if only for argument's sake, that such a first written version of the *Mahābhārata* – whether of parts or of the whole –

5 This is a reason to feel hesitant about the idea of a “normative redaction”, presumably compiled by redactors who knew what they were doing (Bigger 2002). See, however, n. 19 below.

6 Wynne's remark (2009: xxxvii) to the extent that “[a]t the current state of research [...] a critical edition of the *Mokṣadharmā* [portion of the *Mahābhārata*] is probably not possible, since the period of thought in which its individual texts were composed remains obscure” must therefore be based on a completely different notion of what constitutes a critical edition.

did in fact exist. In the present context it doesn't even matter what precise date one assigns to it. I call this first written version its *autograph*, so as to facilitate comparison with the other texts we have considered. The question we have to deal with is, I repeat, whether this autograph and the archetype of the surviving manuscripts were identical or not.

Since the *Mahābhārata* is susceptible to accretions, the answer to this question is not innocuous. If time elapsed between autograph and archetype, the archetype is likely to contain passages that were not present in the autograph.

I have already pointed out that scholars tend to agree that the autograph of the *Mahābhārata* (in the sense just explained) belongs to the last one or two centuries preceding the Common Era. One reason is a study of the datable events with which the *Mahābhārata* is acquainted. A survey leads Witzel (2005: 53–54) to “a post-Alexandrian, pre-Kṣatrapa, and pre-Kuṣāṇa focus of the compilation of the bulk of the epic, perhaps c.100 BCE”.

Both possible answers to our question (whether autograph and archetype are identical or different) are found in contemporary scholarship. While some maintain that the autograph of the *Mahābhārata* is also the archetype of the surviving manuscripts, others claim that the two are different. The arguments of those who claim that they are different are based, not surprisingly, on the further claim that the *Mahābhārata* is not a homogeneous text and that it contains portions that just do not fit in with the rest. Those who think that the two are identical are attracted by claims that the whole of the text constitutes a coherent whole. How do we choose between these two positions?

I have already pointed out that claims about the inner coherence or incoherence of a huge text are notoriously dependent upon personal judgment. Personal judgment, we all know, can and does vary from one person to the next. Where one scholar sees coherence, another sees the opposite – and vice versa. To solve this issue, it would be helpful to have evidence other than personal judgments about coherence and incoherence.

External evidence is not as helpful as one might wish, however. A copperplate inscription from the first half of the sixth century mentions the *Mahābhārata* and calls it the collection (*saṃhitā*) of a hundred thousand [verses].⁷ Since the text of the Critical Edition contains somewhat less than a hundred thousand verses, scholars have concluded that the archetype of the surviving manuscripts

⁷ Fleet (1887: 135–139): “Khoh copper-plate inscription of the Maharaja Sarvanatha.” Date 533–534 CE. As in the other Sarvanatha inscription, but beginning: *uktam ca Mahābhārata śatasahasrīyāṃ saṃhitāyāṃ paramarṣiṇā veda-vyāseṇa Vyāseṇa: pūrvadattāṃ dvijātibhyo* etc. ‘[...] in the Śatasahasrī-Saṃhitā [...]’.

existed before that time. This is long after the probable date of the autograph of the *Mahābhārata*. It leaves open the possibility of a significant temporal distance between autograph and archetype, but does not prove it.

A consideration of the relationship between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Laws of Manu* may be more promising. We have already mentioned the second of these two texts and seen that its archetype contains an original kernel corresponding to its autograph, to which passages have been added. The *Mahābhārata* refers to Manu on numerous occasions. We would like to know whether it refers in these cases to the *Laws of Manu* as we know it, or more vaguely to rules that were associated with the name of a mythical law-giver named Manu. If the *Mahābhārata* refers on all these occasions to the unitary core of the *Laws of Manu*, it follows that the whole of the *Mahābhārata* (or at least all those portions that refer to Manu) is more recent than that text. Since the *Laws of Manu* mentions gold coins, which did not gain currency until the 2nd century of the Common Era, these references would then be more recent than that.

In spite of the claims of the most recent editor of the *Laws of Manu*, this reasoning is not fully convincing: the *Mahābhārata* does not always refer to the *Laws of Manu* that is known to us. However, it is possible that it does so sometimes. If so, it follows that the parts of the *Mahābhārata* that do so are more recent than the *Laws of Manu*, and therefore several centuries younger than the autograph of the epic.⁸

2.1 Archetype and hyparchetype

This evidence supports the separation of autograph and archetype of the *Mahābhārata*. Unfortunately it is not very strong, for it depends on certain assumptions about the composition of the *Laws of Manu*. However, there is another argument, presented some forty years ago by the German scholar Dieter Schlingloff (1969), and based on his study of fragments of the so-called Spitzer Manuscript. Carbon-dating places this manuscript in the second to third century, which means that the text it contains dates from that period at the latest.⁹ It contains an enumeration of *parvans* (“books”) of the *Mahābhārata*. A comparison of this list (or what is left of it) with the current list of *parvans* and sub-*parvans* led Schlingloff to the following results:¹⁰ “The first two *parvans* in the older list are *Ādi* and *Pauloma*, the latter is now a sub-*parvan* of the former.

8 Bronkhorst (forthcoming).

9 Franco (2005); Brockington (forthcoming: 76).

10 As presented by Franco (2004: 9–10).

Āraṇyaka and *Āraṇeya* were the seventh and eighth *parvans* respectively; the former is now the third *parvan* and the latter its sub-*parvan* (no. 44). *Niryāṇa* and *Bhagavadyaṇa* were the ninth and tenth *parvans*, they are now the fifty-sixth and fifty-fourth sub-*parvans* respectively. The *Bhīṣmaparvan* was the eleventh *parvan* and is now the sixth, *Śāntīparvan* was the fifteenth *parvan* and is now the twelfth; the *Āśvamedhika* was the sixteenth *parvan* and is now the fourteenth. The *Anuśāsanaparvan* is missing in the list and was probably not yet part of the epic. The *Virāṭaparvan* is also most probably a later interpolation.”

Schlingloff’s conclusions have been criticized by Alf Hiltebeitel in a passage which I will quote in full (2005: 459 n. 15):

Schlingloff’s [...] claims (1969) about the *Mahābhārata*’s “oldest extant parvan-list” based on the Kuṣāṇa period “Spitzer manuscript” found in east Turkestan have been revived by Franco (2004), with some additional information and suggestions: that it may have come from “the Great Gandhara area” and been written using a broad-nibbed copper pen (vol. 1, 11); that it is probably a Sarvāstivādin text (19) from “around the second half of the third century” (33); that it included a refutation of God in one fragment (18–19); and that its reference to some *Mahābhārata* units and brief encapsulation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* “may have been occasioned by a discussion of the Buddha’s omniscience” (17). If the last two things are true, it hardly seems that the Buddha’s omniscience was directed toward the “extant” totality of either epic. Indeed, not knowing the context, we cannot know what the units were listed for, why both *parvans* and sub-*parvans* were selected, why in some cases they are apparently listed out of sequence and in others with one inclusive of another, why the *Mahābhārata* is digested by (selected) components and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a (minimalist) consecutive narrative, or even that the four fragments mentioning these features were all on the same page. No *Mahābhārata* scholar using the find as evidence of a once-shorter text [...] has tried to explain what kind of “*Bhārata*” it would have been with the odd assortment of units mentioned. With such uncertainties, notions that the *Virāṭa*- and *Anuśāsana-Parvans* would not yet have been extant ... must be taken cum grano salis. Regarding Book 4, the only evidence is that no *Virāṭaparvan* is mentioned between a unit beginning with *a* or *ā*, for which Schlinghoff (338) proposes *ā(raṇeyaṃ)* “or perhaps *ā(jagara)*” – both sub-*parvans* of Book 3 – and *(ni)ryyāṇaṃ* for the *Abhimiryāṇa* sub-*parvan* of Book 5. But *a* could provide *a(jñātavāsa)*, the “residence incognito” widely used to describe the *Virāṭaparvan* [...], or *a(bhīmanyu-vivāha)*, the main *adhyāya* name (4.66–67) in Book 4’s concluding sub-*parvan*.

Let us grant that it is risky to derive detailed information from a lacunary manuscript, barely more than a collection of fragments.¹¹ However, one argument cannot be easily dismissed. Fragment 66a in Franco's edition (2004: 85) has

(śā)nt[i]parvvaṃ 15 āśvamedhikam 1(6)

It is hard to deny that here two consecutive parvans of the *Mahābhārata* are enumerated. In the extant *Mahābhārata* these two are not consecutive: the *Anuśāsanaparvan* has its place between the *Śāntiparvan* and the *Āśvamedhikaparvan*. That is to say, whatever the worth of Schlingloff's other arguments, the Spitzer manuscript does suggest that the *Anuśāsanaparvan* was not yet part of the *Mahābhārata* in its time. Not even Hildebeitel can think of a way to invalidate this particular (tentative) conclusion. The fact that the *Anuśāsanaparvan* does not figure in the list of *parvans* contained in the *Harivaṃśa* further strengthens this impression.¹²

This tentative conclusion is, at first sight, supported by another factor that has not so far been considered. In order to appreciate it, a few words must be said about the way in which the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* has been prepared.

The "purest" version of the *Mahābhārata* – according to its chief-editor, V.S. Sukthankar – is found in manuscripts from Kashmir, written in the Śāradā script. Dunham (1991: 3–4) says the following about them: "There is evidence [...] that the copyists of these Śāradā manuscripts were, on the whole, conservative in regard to additional passages and readings from non-Śāradā sources. While it is difficult to make precise comparisons it is nonetheless generally true that the Śāradā manuscripts present shorter versions of all the *parvans* for which they are extant. It was this characteristic of the manuscripts above any other which encouraged V.S. Sukthankar to declare the Śāradā version the *textus simplicior* in the [Critical Edition], and to regard it as 'the best Northern version, and probably, taken as a whole, the best extant version' (*Ādiparvan*, pp. xlvi, lvi)."

It is true that Sukthankar subsequently obtained and described (1938) a manuscript from Nepal covering (only) the *Ādiparvan* that presents an even shorter version of that portion of the *Mahābhārata*. It is equally true that Grünendahl (1993) has criticized Sukthankar's editorial principles, most notably his attempt to associate a number of manuscripts (those covered by the letter **K**) with the Śāradā manuscripts. It is, finally, also true that recent investigations based on the cladistic analysis of parts of the *Mahābhārata* have raised doubts whether it will

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of Hildebeitel's arguments, see Brockington (forthcoming).

¹² See Brockington (forthcoming: 76, 82–83).

ever be possible to reconstruct a rooted cladistic tree, and with it an archetype.¹³ All this does not however necessarily reduce the likelihood that the available Śāradā manuscripts themselves constitute the only surviving testimony of an early state of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole.¹⁴

Śāradā manuscripts are rare. “There were only six located for use in the Critical Edition. These six do not provide a complete coverage of the *Mahābhārata*, as no Śāradā manuscripts of the *Anuśāsanaparvan*, *Mausalaparvan*, *Mahāprasthānikaparvan*, and *Svargārohaṇaparvan* have been found to date.”¹⁵ Three of these four books are small and unimportant. The *Anuśāsanaparvan*, on the other hand, is quite large (6536 stanzas, according to Reich 1998), alone constituting almost a tenth of the whole epic. Its complete absence in the available Śāradā manuscripts requires an explanation.

A conceivable explanation might be that this book of the *Mahābhārata* was, out of lack of interest for its content, no longer copied in Kashmir. This explanation is not very plausible in view of the fact that the *Anuśāsanaparvan* has undergone massive expansion, more than any other *parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. Furthermore, the sometimes long additions widely differ from each other. Indeed, as Tamar Reich points out in her dissertation (a part of which she kindly made available to me), the branching out of the recensions of the *Anuśāsanaparvan* was a very intense process in itself which took place *after* the establishment of a single common archetype. In other words, the *Anuśāsanaparvan* drew more attention to itself than any other *parvan* during the period following its archetype. The question is therefore, once again: why is there no Kashmiri version of this *parvan*?

I propose an investigation of the common absence of the *Anuśāsanaparvan* in Śāradā manuscripts and the Spitzer Manuscript, which skips that *parvan* entirely. As both the Spitzer Manuscript and the early *Mahābhārata* belonged to northern India, it is at least possible that the author of that manuscript knew the *Mahābhārata* in a form close to the one preserved in Kashmir (i.e. without the *Anuśāsanaparvan*).¹⁶

13 Phillips-Rodriguez (2005; 2007; forthcoming).

14 It is in this context of some interest to note that Vergiani (2009: 247) identifies “a well-defined family of mss [of the *Kāśīkāvṛtti*], all of them in Śāradā except [one manuscript] that seems to be a recent copy of the Śāradā original”. Vergiani continues: “This suggests that for centuries Kashmiri scholars handed down the text in a situation of relative isolation, which accounts for its relatively low amount of contamination with other lines of transmission.” He further refers to the work of Wendy J. Phillips-Rodriguez, who has come to a similar conclusion with regard to the manuscripts of the *Dyūtaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*.

15 Dunham (1991: 2–3).

16 Cf. Fitzgerald (2006: 270 n. 15): “The Kushana-period Spitzer manuscript’s partially legible

With few exceptions, most *Mahābhārata* scholars, I trust, will accept the conclusion that the *Anuśāsanaparvan* is a later addition. Many have reached this conclusion on the basis of its contents.¹⁷ I will merely cite a passage from Winternitz's *A History of Indian Literature*, already cited by Schlingloff (1969: 338): "While Book XII [the *Śāntiparvan*], even though it did not belong to the original epic, yet was probably inserted at a comparatively early date, there can be no doubt with regard to Book XIII [the *Anuśāsanaparvan*], that it was made a component part of the *Mahābhārata* at a still later time. It bears all the marks of a later fabrication. Nowhere in the *Mahābhārata*, to mention only one thing, are the claims of the Brahmans to supremacy over all other strata of society vindicated in such an arrogant and exaggerated manner as in Book XIII."

If we accept the combined evidence of the Spitzer Manuscript and Śāradā manuscripts as interpreted here, would it follow that the autograph and archetype of the *Mahābhārata* must be different from each other? Unfortunately, it does not. It would merely justify the conclusion that the *Anuśāsanaparvan* was not part of the archetype and that its inclusion into the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* was strictly speaking not justified. It would also support Sukthankar's editorial decision to pay special attention to the Śāradā manuscripts. It would further suggest that the archetype of all surviving manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata* is older than the Spitzer Manuscript, and would therefore presumably date from before the second or third century, say from before 200 CE.

I am aware of the somewhat shaky nature of these conclusions. What, for example, if the author of the Spitzer Manuscript knew only the regional variant of the *Mahābhārata* from Kashmir, which (as we have come to suspect) never added the *Anuśāsanaparvan*? And what if, contrary to our hypothesis, the Śāradā version of the *Mahābhārata* once did contain the *Anuśāsanaparvan*, a portion of which for reasons unknown to us did not then survive? A priori we cannot exclude these possibilities, but I would argue that they are so improbable as to make it more worth our while to further explore the idea that the archetype of

list of *Mahābhārata parvans* is strong evidence that there did exist written versions of the *Mbh* quite different from the one uncovered in the course of the critical Pune edition of the *Mbh*. Evidently the tradition uncovered by Sukthankar and his colleagues eclipsed fairly thoroughly the version of the epic known to the Spitzer manuscript."

17 Brockington (forthcoming: 83) makes the following specification: "The absence of the *Anuśāsanaparvan* in both lists [i.e. in the Spitzer Manuscript and in the list of *parvans* in the *Harivaṃśa*, JB] is fully in accord with what I consider to be its late inclusion within the *Mahābhārata* on grounds of both language and subject matter. I would not, however, exclude the possibility that the substance of the final two *adhyāyas* of the present *Anuśāsanaparvan* [...] formed the conclusion of an originally much shorter *Śāntiparvan*, to which the first few verses of *Mbh* 12.47 could once have provided a lead-in."

the *Mahābhārata* did not contain the *Anuśāsanaparvan*. In that case, we would wish to know what the real archetype of the surviving manuscripts looked like. But it would then also be clear that every attempt to reconstruct this earlier archetype would pose major difficulties. The Śāradā manuscripts would inevitably play a major role in such a construction. These manuscripts, as we have seen, do not contain three additional books – the *Mausalaparvan*, *Mahāprasthānikaparvan*, and *Svargārohaṇaparvan* – but would the exclusion of these books from the critical text be justified? The limited number of Śāradā manuscripts and absence of corroborative evidence would make this a difficult and risky decision. We have also seen that “it is [...] generally true that the Śāradā manuscripts present shorter versions of all the *parvans* for which they are extant”. The implications of this would have to be investigated in details for all the books of the *Mahābhārata*.

This task would no doubt be time-consuming, but its results could turn out to be rewarding. Before engaging in this work, however, one further tentative conclusion may be drawn from our reflections so far. It would seem that, in rough approximation, we can usefully speak of an archetype and a hyparchetype of the text. Assuming that the editors of the Critical Edition by and large did a good job, most of the manuscripts derive from a hyparchetype that contained the *Anuśāsanaparvan* and much else that had no place in the earlier archetype. This earlier archetype is known to us from only a handful of manuscripts, mainly or exclusively in the Śāradā script. The hyparchetype, on the other hand, underlies virtually all manuscripts with the exception of this handful.

At this point we have to confront the crucial question: is it possible that the archetype thus reconstructed (assuming that it is possible to reconstruct it at all) can be identical with the autograph (i.e. with the earliest written version of the *Mahābhārata*)? This reconstructed archetype would obviously be a much leaner text than the one reconstructed in the Critical Edition, lacking the *Anuśāsanaparvan* and much else. But would it be identical with the autograph? We will return to this question below.

Whatever the position we take with regard to the archetype, we are still confronted with the extraordinary success of the hyparchetype. How did this hyparchetype, to which the *Anuśāsanaparvan* and much else had been added, succeed in imposing itself on the manuscript traditions to the extent that only a handful of Śāradā manuscripts reveal to us that there was an earlier archetype?

Once again, I am not in a position to propose a certain or even very likely answer to this question. We saw that archetypes owe their success to various factors, the composition of a popular commentary being foremost among them. Of other explanations that have been proposed, one is the intervention of a centralized political power. It is true that the Gupta empire would conceivably

fit the bill in the case of the *Mahābhārata*. The Gupta empire united much of northern India during the fourth and fifth centuries CE. This is later than our postulated archetype – as it should be. The question as to how the Gupta rulers went about imposing one particular version of the *Mahābhārata* at the expense of others remains open, however.¹⁸ This imposition must have been so successful that even future copyists would no longer copy other versions than this one, a major feat indeed.¹⁹

2.2 Autograph and archetype

At this point we must consider a piece of evidence with possible bearing both on the question of whether the autograph and archetype of the *Mahābhārata* were identical and on the question of the extent to which the hyparchetype had been able to replace competitors in the fifth century CE. This piece of evidence has been brought to light by Ashok Aklujkar and presented in a lecture (“Language philosophy in the Mahābhārata”) at the Brown Conference on Early Indian Philosophy in the Mahābhārata (April 2010). Briefly put, Aklujkar shows that the ancient *Vṛtti* on Bhartṛhari’s *Vākyapadīya* – both of which appear to belong to the fifth century CE – quotes, under Vkp 1.159–179,²⁰ a passage from the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (14.21) in a form that appears to be older and more original than what we find in the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* (and in all the mss. used for this edition, including one Śāradā ms. from Kashmir). This suggests that in the fifth century there was at least one version of the *Mahābhārata* in circulation that was not derived from the hyparchetype, or even from the archetype. If so, this version must be a descendant of a manuscript that was closer to the autograph than the archetype, which would then prove that autograph and archetype were indeed different from each other.²¹

18 An example of a text that was reworked several times (and tells us so) is the *Carakasamhitā*, a medical text. This original work by Agniveśa was revised by Caraka, to which Dṛḍhabala subsequently added a number of chapters. Unlike the compositions considered in our main text, all surviving manuscripts of the *Carakasamhitā* go back to an archetype that was close to Dṛḍhabala’s autograph (Maas 2010). The texts of Agniveśa and Caraka have left no traces except through the intermediary of Dṛḍhabala’s version.

19 One might in this case think of a “normative redaction” (Bigger 2002), but this expression is more appropriately reserved not for the archetype but the hyparchetype including the *Anuśāsanaparvan*.

20 Ed. Iyer (1966: 217–218); Vkp = Bhartṛhari, *Vākyapadīya*, ed. W. RAU, Wiesbaden 1977.

21 Fitzgerald’s observation to the extent that “the tradition uncovered by Sukthankar and his colleagues eclipsed fairly thoroughly the version of the epic known to the Spitzer manuscript” (n. 16, above) would in this case be even more applicable with regard to the version of the *Mahābhārata* known to the author of the *Vṛtti*.

3. CONCLUSION

At the end of this paper we are left with as many uncertainties as at its beginning. However, I hope that some contributions have been made to the discussion going on in specialist circles about whether the autograph and archetype of the *Mahābhārata* were identical. One of these contributions is the notion of a double archetype: more precisely, an archetype and a hyparchetype. The second one is a piece of evidence that might be used as an argument to show that archetype and autograph were not identical.

These proposals have, admittedly, a somewhat speculative character. They are not, however, mere imagination run wild. Both of them may be susceptible to further confirmation, or indeed refutation. This, however, is a challenge to future research, the outcome of which it is not possible at present to say anything whatsoever about.

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