

JOHANNES BRONKHORST

Who Composed the *Mahābhārata*, Why, and When?

Abstract

This paper examines Sukthankar's thesis as to the role of the Bhārgavas in the composition of the *Mahābhārata* and proposes an alternative interpretation of the evidence. It draws attention to the link between Bhārgavas and *Atharvaveda*, and to the importance the *Atharvaveda* gains in *Gṛhyasūtras* and *Mahābhārata*. The *Atharvaveda* plays a central role in the way Brahmanism reasserted itself after the disappearance of the Mauryan empire, and in the renewed relationship between Brahmins and rulers (*kṣatriyas*). The paper concludes with some observations about *Mahābhārata* in Pāṇini's grammar and certain *Gṛhyasūtras*.

An alternative to Sukthankar's thesis

More than eighty years have passed since V. S. Sukthankar published his article "The Bhṛgu and the Bhārata: a text-historical study" (1936). Some twenty five years ago Brockington resumed its main thesis in the following words (1998: 155–156):

"The process of transformation seems in the case of both epics to be linked with passing from the hands of their traditional reciters, the *sūtas* and *kuśīlavas*, into those of the brāhmins as the guardians of

all traditional learning. In a seminal article, Sukthankar elucidates the role of the Bhārgavas in the amplification of the *Mahābhārata* and in particular its brahmanisation. He goes through the text, section by section, noting the evidence for Bhārgava influence whenever it appears. For example, within the *Ādiparvan*, Sukthankar identified the *Aurvopākhyāna* (1,169–173) with its Bhārgava hero as ‘a digression within a digression’; in the *Sabhāparvan* there are only brief mentions of Bhārgavas, usually included in lists of those present on various occasions, whereas the *Āraṇyakaparvan* has a considerable amount of Bhārgava material incorporated into it. The largest amount of Bhārgava material is included in the *Anuśāsanaparvan*.

As his name Bhārgava indicates, Rāma Jāmadagnya is the hero of the Bhṛgu group of Brahmins, who were especially connected with the inflation of the *Mahābhārata* after supplanting the *sūtas* and through it with bolstering the claims to superiority of the brāhmins. ... [M]ost of the Bhārgava inflations, such as the extreme emphasis on Rāma Jāmadagnya, remain and Sukthankar thought that the *Mahābhārata* only passed from their control when the last four books were being added. Thus, Rāma Jāmadagnya’s participation in epic events results from interpolation and accounts of his massacre of the *kṣatriyas* are intended to emphasise Bhārgava control over the epic itself, reflecting not a military but a literary struggle.”

Sukthankar’s article has exerted a major influence on *Mahābhārata* studies during subsequent years, with many scholars accepting its main thesis. This thesis, to put it briefly, is that the Bhārgavas—i.e. the real historical Bhārgavas, not the Bhārgavas that figure in stories in the epic—played an important role in the amplification and brahmanisation of the *Mahābhārata*. Bhārgava control over the epic only passed onto others when the last four books were being added.

That this was Sukthankar’s main thesis is clear from his article, most explicitly perhaps p. 74:

“The infiltration of masses of Bhārgava material in the shape of Bhārgava myths and legends, the manner of its treatment, and even that strange admixture of the Epic with the Dharma and Nīti elements ... thus appears[s] to find a simple and straightforward explanation in the assumption of an *important unitary diaskeuasis of the epic under very strong and direct Bhārgava influence.*” (Sukthankar’s emphasis).

Its attraction to subsequent scholarship is clear from Goldman’s remark, made in 1977 (p. 2) that “[t]his theory has proven basic to all subsequent study of the *Mahābhārata.*”

Sukthankar’s assumption, his main thesis, is not the only one capable of explaining the abundant Bhārgava material in the *Mahābhārata*. Exactly the same facts allow, I propose, of an altogether different explanation. Sukthankar’s thesis explains literary features with the help of an assumed historical situation. This assumed historical situation is based on these literary features only, and is not confirmed by independent evidence.¹ The alternative explanation I will suggest also assumes a historical situation, different from the one proposed by Sukthankar. But unlike his, the historical situation I will present finds independent support in a variety of sources.

I will first describe the historical situation as I see it, providing evidence in its support as we proceed.

The political unification of northern India in the fourth and third centuries BCE, under the Nandas and the Mauryas, was a catastrophe for Brahmanism. Confined as it was to a part of the Ganges plain, Brahmanism had remained largely unaffected by the ideas and customs of those who lived in other parts of northern India. The creation of a large empire changed all that. The home ground of this empire lay in Magadha, to the east of the area that Brahmanism considered its own, and the ideas and customs of its emperors had little in common

1 See, e.g., Minkowski 1991: 399: “neither Sukthankar nor any subsequent proponent of this theory ... has presented any epigraphical, textual or other historical evidence independent of the epic that demonstrates the existence of a distinct Bhārgava movement.”

with those that held sway in the heartland of Brahmanism. And yet, these emperors did not keep these ideas and customs to themselves. Though tolerant with regard to different ways of life, up to a point, they privileged those whose ideas were close to their own, and even imposed some of their own views on all their subjects without exception. Brahmanism could not but be disadvantaged by this new order. If it had to survive, it had to do something.

Brahmanism had so far been a religion, probably a religion of the type which the Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2003) would call a primary religion, a religion inseparable from the state. Brahmins played an essential role in it, primarily as priests. The privileged position of these Brahmins in their homeland had been assured, depending as it did on their special relationship with village-based warlords. The establishment of a (relatively) centralized empire put all this in danger. There was no elevated position for the Brahmins in this empire, and none of the privileges they were accustomed to were guaranteed. If they wanted to secure for themselves, in the Nanda and Maurya empires and in the political formations that succeeded them, the same elevated positions they had been used to, Brahmanism had to reinvent itself. This is precisely what happened. As a response to the new challenges, a new Brahmanism arose from the ashes of the old one. This new Brahmanism claimed continuity with its earlier forms, but was in reality different in various respects. One may even wonder whether or to what extent the new Brahmanism was still a religion in the same way as the old Brahmanism had been. The new Brahmanism was primarily a vision of society, a socio-political ideology. It was the vision of society in which Brahmins occupy the highest position. This vision is justified by the claim that Brahmins have privileged access to a higher world. This claim, one might argue, is religious. But the primary requirement of a convert—if this is the term to use—is societal. On the religious level little is required of him beyond accepting the special status of Brahmins. In practice there are few, if any, limitations with regard to religious beliefs and practices even for the Brahmins themselves. Initially their beliefs and practices were, of course, close to those we

know from Vedic literature. But they changed in the course of time, at least for some Brahmins. This led to frictions within the Brahmanical fold, but less so among the general population. Indeed, certain Brahmins yielded to popular beliefs and practices, without abandoning their central claim that they, as Brahmins, have privileged access to a higher reality.² Brahmins ended up providing “religious” (mainly ritual) services to Jainas and, in Southeast Asia, to Buddhists.

The new Brahmanism did not try to make religious converts. Its aim was the imposition of its vision of society, and its natural target the political ruler. Following the creation and subsequent collapse of the Nanda and Maurya empires, Brahmins made a major effort to elaborate a vision of society that could deal with a wide range of questions in the realm of politics and governance. They tried to make themselves indispensable advisers to kings, capable of counselling the rulers in all fields of statecraft, and they succeeded in doing so. But behind the help they offered in these areas there was an implicit threat. Brahmins, after all, had access to a hidden world, and were therefore in the possession of otherworldly powers. They could use these powers to benefit the king whom they counselled. If they were not treated correctly, they could use those same powers to harm him.

Brahmins, then, developed various skills that made them valuable even in societies where their predominance and sacrificial skills were not recognized. Their traditional sacrificial skills were of little use in such relatively unfriendly surroundings. Not being able to sacrifice for others, Brahmins emphasized henceforth their domestic rites. These depended for their execution on no one else but the Brahmin himself. This appears to be the period in which domestic ritual is described in texts which survive under the name of Gṛhya Sūtras. Lubin (2005: 84) states the following about these:

2 Indeed, according to the Mīmāṃsaka Kumāṛila (probably seventh century CE), “the ‘dharmic character’ (*dharmatva*) of the rites performed in the temples of deities is, like several other practices, approved *because those who perform them are the same as the performers of ‘Vedic sacrifices’*” (TanVār on *sūtra* 1.3.7, p. 126: *vaidikāiḥ kartṛsāmānyāt*; Colas 2004: 155).

“The *gr̥hyasūtras* might contain some hints of a response to these developments, even though the developments themselves are barely alluded to at all.³ [...] there are signs that the genre came to embody the *Zeitgeist* of the period. A striking indication of this doctrinal shift is the often-expressed view that *gr̥hya* rites were equivalent or superior to *śrauta* rites, and not simply pale shadows of them.⁴ Such arguments pick up themes heard also in the mystical reflections of the *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣads*: the idea that all sins could be expunged by reciting a litany in the wilderness to the accompaniment of a series of ghee offerings in a single fire (*Taittirīyāranyaka*, 2), or that all the rewards of a pious *śrautin* life could be secured through the regular performance of a few simple ‘super-sacrifices’ (*mahāyajñas*). Claims for the sufficiency of *mantra*-recitation as a form of worship in itself paved the way for the *gr̥hyasūtras*’ codification of a variety of regimens consisting of ascetic discipline, recitation, and perhaps simple *homas* to expiate sins and to fulfil wishes.”⁵

Lubin further draws attention to a trend in these texts toward identifying initiation and *brahmacarya* (rather than marriage) as the starting point for constructing a framework for an orthoprax life of piety, and to the multiplication of similar *vratas* as a framework for personal piety (Lubin 2005: 88).

However, personal piety—including the performance of domestic rites—may contribute to the general image that Brahmins could project of themselves, it is not sufficient to secure Brahmins their rightful place at the top of human society. Brahmins also had supernatural

3 “These developments”, for Lubin, are the growth of urban polities, not the socio-political developments linked to the establishment of the Mauryan Empire, which seem to us more important in the present context.

4 Cf. Gonda 1977: 561: “it is expressly stated that the one who has set up his domestic fire is identical with the *āhitāgni* of the solemn rites” and 561 n. 50: “HGS. 1,26.3; and cf. *ĀgnGS.* 2,7.2; see also *BhGS.* 3,18 (= *ĀgnGS.* 2,7.9).”

5 Cf. *ĀśvGS* 1,1.4: “Verily also by the performing of adoration (*namas*) (the gods may be worshipped); for the gods are not beyond the performing of adoration; adoration verily is sacrifice—thus runs a *Brāhmaṇa*.” (tr. Oldenberg)

powers, which in the good old days flowed through the performance of the solemn ritual. Without clients for these expensive rites, the supernatural powers of the Brahmins were in danger of being underused and overlooked. Fortunately there was a solution to this problem as well: the magical formulas that came to be collected in the *Atharvaveda*.

“According to the Āṅgirasakalpa of the Atharvaveda there are in the atharvanic tradition ten classes of rites, viz. those that, like the German *Segen*, are to appease or avert evil (*śāntika*), that are to promote welfare (*pauṣṭika*), to bring others into subjection by means of charms (*vaśa*), to hinder or paralyse (*stambhana*), to bewilder (*mohana*), to bring about hatred (*dveṣaṇa*), to eradicate (*uccāṭana*), to kill (*māraṇa*), to seduce (*ākarṣaṇa*), and to scare away (*vidrāvāṇa*).”⁶

Whether or not we accept this enumeration as exhaustive or even fully appropriate (activities like prognostication and medical cures were also associated with the *Atharvaveda*), it will be clear that the formulas collected in the *Atharvaveda* provide opportunities to Brahmins to use their supernatural powers also outside the realm of extensive and expensive solemn rites. These kinds of formulas and the associated rites made it possible for Brahmins to exert their powers even in hostile situations, in circumstances where the support of the ruling classes was not guaranteed or worse.

It goes almost without saying that these alternative ways of using their supernatural powers came in handy during the time when Brahmanism had to reinvent itself and had to establish its worth in the eyes of ruling classes for whom the solemn Vedic ritual was not part of inherited custom. The formulas of the *Atharvaveda* were of the greatest importance to Brahmins during this period. Indeed, it is possible, even likely, that these formulas were collected into what we now call the *Atharvaveda* precisely during this period. A consideration

6 Gonda 1975: 277.

of references to the *Atharvaveda* and its formulas in Vedic and early post-Vedic literature supports this.

The *Atharvaveda* in tradition

The *Atharvaveda* has come to be looked upon as number four of a set of four Vedas: *R̥gveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda*. This was not always the case. In fact, our early sources rarely speak of four Vedas: they prefer the numbers three and five. The *Atharvaveda* does not figure in the list of three, nor is it usually included in the list of five. Let us consider the evidence.⁷

The tradition of five (rather than three or four) Vedas is attested both in Vedic and non-Vedic texts. The Buddhist canon preserves it in a form which does not mention the *Atharvaveda*. The following phrase recurs often in Pali:

... *tiṅṅaṃ vedānaṃ pāragū sanighaṇḍukeṭubhānaṃ*
*sākkharappabhedānaṃ itihāsapañcamānaṃ padaḷo veyyākaraṇo ...*⁸

The same phrase occurs in Sanskrit with minor variations:

... *trayāṇāṃ vedānāṃ pāragah sanighaṇṭakaitabhānāṃ*
*sākṣaraprabhedānāṃ itihāsapañcamānāṃ padaḷo vyākaraṇaḥ ...*⁹

... *trayāṇāṃ vedānāṃ pārago sākṣaraprabhedānāṃ itihāsapañcamānāṃ*
*sanighaṇṭakaitabhānāṃ*¹⁰

7 The following has been taken from Bronkhorst 1989: 129–132.

8 DN 1,88; 114; 138; MN 2,133; 141; [146]; 147; 165; 168; 210; AN 1,163; 166; 3,223; Sn p. 105.

9 Avs 2,19.

10 Mvu 1,231.17–18.

... trayānām vedānām pārāgo sanirghaṅṭhakaiṭabhānām
itihāsapamcamānām akṣarapadavyākaraṇe analpako ...¹¹

... trayānām vedānām pārāgo akṣaraprabhedānām itihāsapamcamānām
sanighaṅṭhakaiṭabhānām anupadakavyākaraṇakuśalo ...¹²

An echo of this phrase is found in Avadāna 33 of the *Divyāvadāna*:

... vedān samanumarati sma sāṅgopāṅgān sarahasyān
sanighaṅṭhakaiṭabhān sākṣaraprabhedān itihāsapamcamān ...¹³

It seems clear that all these phrases agree in enumerating five Vedas. The reason to think so is that *itihāsapamcamānām* (or its equivalent in Pali) is a Bahuvrīhi compound qualifying *vedānām*, and should therefore be translated: “with *itihāsa* as fifth [Veda]”. We shall see that this interpretation fits other evidence which will be discussed presently.

The different phrases show some variation regarding the precise contents of Vedas number four and five. They all consider *itihāsa* ‘legend’ part (sometimes the whole) of the fifth Veda. Most of them agree that the fourth Veda encompasses *akṣara* / *akkhara* ‘phonology (PTSD)’ and *pra-* / *pabheda* ‘etymology (PTSD), exegesis (Rhys Davids 1899: 109)’, or perhaps rather *akṣaraprabheda* / *akkharappabheda* ‘philologische Technik (Franke 1913: 87)’; one however does not include them in any Veda. The items *nighaṅṭa* / *nirghaṅṭa* / *nighaṅṭu* / *nighaṅḍu* ‘lexicology / etymology (BHSD), synonymische Wortverzeichnisse (Franke 1913: 87), explanation (PTSD), indices (Rhys Davids 1899: 109), vocabularies (Horner 1957: 317)’ and *kaiṭabha* / *keṭubha* ‘ritual science (BHSD), Hilfsbücher (Franke 1913: 87), ritual (PTSD)’ are usually part of the fourth Veda, in two cases of the fifth.

Some passages of the *Madhyamāgama* preserved in Chinese mention five Vedas, but specify the contents of the fifth one in an altogether

11 Mvu 2,77.9–10; Mvu 2,89.16–17 has *kuśalo* for *analpako*.

12 Mvu 3,450.6–7.

13 Divy 619,21–23.

different way: “[He] has crossed the four classical texts, with the correct literature of profound intelligence on causes and conditions as fifth.”¹⁴

Here one may suspect that the *Atharvaveda* has, implicitly, made its way into this list. If so, this may indicate its relative lateness.

The five Vedas are again, this time explicitly, referred to in an otherwise obscure verse of the *Samyuttanikāya* (1,29):

pañcaveda (v.l. -vedā) sataṃ samam |
tapassī brāhmaṇācaram (v.l. caraṃti) ||

(Note that the prose portions of the Pali canon refer always to five Vedas; only in verse the three Vedas are referred to a few times,¹⁵ and this may be an abbreviation dictated by the demands of metre.)

The five Vedas are enumerated, finally, in the *Dīpavaṃsa* (Dīp 5,62): ... *irurvedaṃ yajurvedaṃ sāmavedaṃ pi nighaṇḍuṃ itihāsaṃ ca pañcamam.*

In Vedic literature itself we find the five Vedas enumerated at ChU 7,1.2; 7,1.4; 7,2.1 and 7,7.1. ChU 7,1.4 reads:

ṛgvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmaveda ātharvaṇaś caturtha itihāsapurāṇaḥ pañcamo vedānāṃ vedaḥ pitryo rāśir daivo nidhir vākovākyam ekāyanaṃ devavidyā brahmavidyā bhūtavidyā kṣatravidyā nakṣatravidyā sar-padevajanavidyā.

Most of the terms of this list are unknown (see Horsch 1966: 33). It is clear that *caturtha* ‘the fourth’ refers to a Veda, viz., the *Atharvaveda*: the same must therefore be true of ‘the fifth’. (We may follow Horsch, and thus indirectly W. Rau, in taking *itihāsapurāṇaḥ pañcamo vedānāṃ vedaḥ* together, translating ‘*itihāsa* and *purāṇa*, which

14 TI 26 (vol. 1) p. 663c line 8, p. 680b lines 28–29, p. 685a lines 11–12.

15 Th 1171; SN 4,118; Jā 6,214.

constitute the fifth Veda among the Vedas'. This does not however affect our main argument.)¹⁶

The Buddhist enumerations of five Vedas have no place for the *Atharvaveda*. The Jaina canonical scriptures contain an enumeration which seems clearly derived from the one used by the Buddhists, but *with* the *Atharvaveda*. Unlike the *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad*, it does not simply drop the 'original' fourth Veda, but moves it to the sixth place. *Itihāsa* keeps its traditional fifth place. The result is an enumeration of six Vedas:¹⁷

*riuvveda-jajuvveda-sāmaveda-athavvaṇaveda-itihāsapaṃcamāṇaṃ
nighaṃṭachaṭṭhāṇaṃ caīṇhaṃ vedāṇaṃ saṃgovamgāṇaṃ sarahas-
sāṇaṃ sārae vārae pārae ...*

Interestingly, an enumeration that is several times repeated in the *Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad* (BĀU) (2,4.10; 4,1.2; 4,5.11 [= ŚBr 14,5.4.10; 14,6.10.6; 14,7.3.11]) and *Maitrāyaṇi-Upaniṣad* (6,32), apparently know the *Atharvaveda* but do not call it a Veda: *rgvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo 'tharvāṅgirasa itihāsaḥ purāṇaṃ vidyā upaniṣadaḥ ślokāḥ sūtrāṇy anuvyākhyānāni vyākhyānāni*. Three items are called Veda, none of the others are.

This last enumeration counts among a number of Vedic passages that name the *Ṛgveda*, the *Yajurveda* and the *Sāmaveda*, but not the *Atharvaveda*. The terms '*Ṛgveda*', '*Yajurveda*' and '*Sāmaveda*' also occur in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* (5,32), the *Ṣaḍviṃśabrāhmaṇa* (1,5.8; 4,1.2), and in three further passages from the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*

16 Śaṅkara's comments on ChU 7,1.2 are intriguing (cf. Horsch 1966: 36). *Vedānāṃ vedaḥ* is taken as a new item after the fifth Veda, meaning *vyākaraṇa*, because by means of *vyākaraṇa* the *Ṛgveda* etc. are known in their division into *pada* etc. (*vyākaraṇena hi padādivibhāgaśo rgvedādayo jñāyante*). The result is so close to the enumerations in *Avadānaśataka* and *Mahāvastu* presented above that it seems likely that Śaṅkara had undergone Buddhist influence in this regard.

17 Vy 2,1.12; 9,33.2; *Aupapātika Sūtra* (ed. Leumann) section 77, and elsewhere, see Charpentier 1922: 28.

(11,5.8.3–6; 12,3.4.9; 14,4.3.12 [= BĀU 1,5.5]). It would seem that in these passages the terms ‘*Ṛgveda*’, ‘*Yajurveda*’ and ‘*Sāmaveda*’—in the singular—denote what is nowadays also known by the names ‘*Ṛgveda-Saṃhitā*’, ‘*Yajurveda-Saṃhitā*’ and ‘*Sāmaveda-Saṃhitā*’.¹⁸ The non-mention of the *Atharvaveda*, as Veda, suggests that its hymns were not collected until after the other three Vedas had been constituted.

A confirmation that the *Atharvaveda* did not exist as a collection until long after the other three Vedas had been collected is found in the *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad*.¹⁹ Sections 3,1–5 make a number of comparisons, or rather identifications, of which the following are of interest to us. Section 3,1 states that the bees are the *ṛc* (pl.), the flower is the *Ṛgveda*; in 3,2 the bees are the *yajus* (pl.), the flower is the *Yajurveda*; and in 3,3 the bees are the *sāman* (pl.), the flower is the *Sāmaveda*. The interesting observation comes in section 3,4, where the bees are the *atharvāṅgirasah* and the flower is *itihāsapurāṇam*. In 3,5, finally, the bees are the hidden teachings (*guhya ādeśāḥ*), which may be the Upaniṣads, and the flower is *brahman* (n.). Since the *atharvāṅgirasah* are the formulas collected in the *Atharvaveda* as we know it, the logic of the situation would have required that the flower in 3,4 be identified with the *Atharvaveda*. The fact that it is not, strongly suggests that the author of this passage did not know of such a definite collection of *atharvans* and *āṅgirasas*. *Itihāsa* and *purāṇa* certainly do not designate the *Atharvaveda*, neither separately nor jointly (see Horsch 1966: 13f).

Bloomfield (1899: 2f), too, came to the conclusion “that many hymns and prose pieces in the [*Atharvaveda*] date from a very late period of Vedic productivity.” Indeed, “there is nothing in the way of assuming that the composition of such texts as the [*Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*] and [*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*] preceded the redactions of the Atharvan Saṃhitās.”

18 Note that these expressions are totally unknown to the Vedic texts.

19 The following paragraphs have been taken from Bronkhorst 1991: § 4.4.

At least one recension of the *Atharvaveda* existed, in its collected form, at the time of Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (second half of the second century BCE). This text cites in its opening passage the first lines of the four Vedas. First comes *śaṃ no devīr abhiṣṭaye*, which begins the Paippalāda version of the *Atharvaveda*. Patañjali even informs us of the size of the *Atharvaveda* known to him, saying (MahāBh vol. 2, p. 378, l. 11; on P. 5,2.37): *viṃśino 'ṅgirasah*. This fits the twenty books of the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā*.²⁰ We may conclude from this that the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā* existed more or less in its present form in the middle of the second century BCE.²¹

This survey shows two things: First, it demonstrates that the formulas of the *Atharvaveda* enter rather late into regular enumerations. And second, it confirms that references to an *Atharvaveda* in collected form are later still.

The *Atharvaveda* in the *Gṛhyasūtras*

The very fact that the *Atharvaveda* or its formulas found acceptance in polite society should be interpreted in the light of our earlier reflections: Brahmins who had lost their traditional security needed these formulas and the accompanying rites in order to create a new living for themselves. We must expect a similar increase of respectability for the *Atharvaveda* in the *Gṛhyasūtras*. This is indeed what we find.

The first thing to be noted is that, as pointed out by Hermann Oldenberg (1892: x) “the *Atharvaveda-saṃhitā* ... may be regarded in the main as a treasure of *Gṛhya* verses”. The special connection of the

20 Note that the *Mahābhāṣya* also prefers the Paippalāda version of the *Atharvaveda* in some citations (see Renou 1953: 463).

21 Among the texts that explicitly refer to the *Atharvaveda* we must mention the later portions of the *Milindapañha* (Mil 178,15–17: *Irubbedam Yajubbedam Sāmavedam Athabbanavedam lakkhaṇam itihāsam purāṇam nighaṇḍu ketubham akkharappahedaṃ padaṃ veyyākaraṇam ...*) and perhaps the *Arthasāstra* (ArthŚ 1,3.1–2: *sāmargyajurvedās trayas trayī/ atharvavedetihāsavedau ca vedāh/*).

Atharvaveda with *grhya* ritual is emphasized by the fact that, where as a general rule each *Grhyasūtra* presupposes a previous knowledge of the ritual which is acquired through the study of the corresponding *Śrautasūtra*, this relation is reversed in the domain of the *Atharvaveda* literature: here the *Śrautasūtra* (the *Vaitānasūtra*) presupposes the *Grhyasūtra* (the *Kauśikasūtra*) (Oldenberg 1892: xxx-xxxI, with p. xxxI n. 1).

Several *Grhyasūtras* refer to the *Atharvaveda* as *Veda*. *Śāṅkhāyana-* (2,10.8), *Kauśītaka*-²² (2,6.8), *Hiraṇyakeśin-* (1,2.8.14), *Pāraskara-* (2,5.13) and *Mānava-* (1,2.6; 1,22.18) clearly indicate that they know four Vedas. *Pāraskara-* (2,10.4–7) and *Hiraṇyakeśin-* (2,8.19.6) mention the *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda* by name; so does the *Mantrapāṭha* which accompanies the *Āpastambagrhyasūtra*.²³

It is clear from the above that many, if not all, *Grhyasūtras* give the *Atharvaveda* (the *collected text*) a place in the enumeration of Vedas which it had often been denied by others. Some indications suggest that the *Atharvaveda* had not just obtained a place in the traditional enumeration, but a place of relative honour.²⁴ This may follow from the name which *Śāṅkhāyana-* (1,16.3) and *Kauśītakagrhyasūtra* (1,10.1) reserve for the *Atharvaveda*, viz., *Brahmaveda*. This may be taken to indicate that these *Grhyasūtras* looked upon the *Atharvaveda* as the *Veda* of the *brahman*-priest. This attribution (of the *brahman*-priest

22 The *Kauśītaka Grhyasūtra*, which professes to belong to the same *Ṛgvedic* tradition as the *Śāṅkhāyana Grhyasūtra* (Gonda 1977: 606–607), follows the latter “during the greater part of the work, nearly word for word” (Oldenberg 1886: 6).

23 Gonda 1977: 579.

24 The honour is relative, for not as great as it might have been given the shared subject-matter of *Atharvaveda* and *Grhyasūtras*. Bloomfield (1897: xlv) proposes as explanation that “even the *Grhya*-rites, popular, nay vulgar, as they must have been in their untrammelled beginnings, were, so to speak, Rishified, and passed through in due time a process of school-treatment which estranged them as far as possible from the specifically Atharvanic connections, and assimilated them, as far as possible, to the *Ṛgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, and *Yajurveda*, as the case may be.”

to the *Atharvaveda*) is not old. Various Vedic passages associate this priest, not with the *Atharvaveda*, but rather with the three others, or with the three kinds of formulas (*rc*, *yajus*, *sāman*) that have their place in them.²⁵ There are even reasons to think that each of the other Vedas demanded the position of *brahman*-priest for itself.²⁶ All this is understandable, for the *brahman* supervises the Śrauta ritual. What is more, he is the only officiating priest in the Gr̥hya ritual (even though his part in the ceremony is not obligatory).²⁷

Not surprisingly, the expression *Brahmaveda* is one that, in Vedic and auxiliary literature, is virtually confined to texts of the *Atharvaveda*. The *Śāṅkhāyana*- and *Kauṣītaka-gr̥hyasūtras* are the only exceptions outside the *Atharvaveda*. The expression Brahma-Veda occurs a number of times in texts belonging to the *Atharvaveda*: in the *Gopathabrāhmaṇa* and in the *Parisiṣṭas*.²⁸ The *Vaitānasūtra* (1,1) speaks of the *brahman*-priest as someone who knows the *Brahma-Veda* (*brahmā ... brahmavedavid*). The link between the *brahman*-priest and the *Atharvaveda* finds further expression in the *Gopathabrāhmaṇa* (1,2.18) and in the *Kauśikasūtra* (94,2–4), which characterize this priest as *bhṛgvaṅgirovid* “knower of the *Atharvaveda*”.²⁹

The obvious conclusion is that the *Śāṅkhāyana*- and *Kauṣītaka-gr̥hyasūtras* accept that there is a special connection between the *brahman*-priest and the *Atharvaveda*. This is important, because there

25 Bloomfield 1899: 31. See, e.g., AiBr 5,33 (25,8); JBr 1,358; ŚBr 11,5.8.4; discussed in Bronkhorst 1989. Further ĀpŚS 24,1.16–19: *ṛgvedena hotā karoti | sāmavedena udgātā | yajurvedenādhvaryuḥ | sarvair brahmā*; cited and discussed in Inden 1992: 559, 574 n. 12. About AiBr 5,33, Deshpande (2012: 342) states: “This passage seems to presume as its *pūrvapakṣa* the claim of the Atharvavedin for the role of the Brahmā priest. Such a claim is clearly rejected by the passage.”

26 See Inden 1992: 560, with a reference to KauṣBr 6,11.

27 Gonda 1980: 194. Cf. GobhGS 1,9.8–9: “The Brahman is the only officiating priest at the Pākayajñas. (The sacrificer) himself is *hotṛ*.” (*brahmaivaika ṛtvik pākayajñeṣu svayaṃ hotā bhavati*; tr. Oldenberg).

28 Bloomfield, 1899: 10.

29 *bhṛgvaṅgiras* is another special term of the *Atharvan* tradition; see Bloomfield 1899: 10.

is also a connection between the *brahman*-priest and the *purohita*, the ‘domestic priest’ of the king. The *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* states the following about it (Macdonell & Keith 1912, Vol. II: 7–8, s.v. *purohita*):

“According to Geldner, the Purohita from the beginning acted as the Brahman priest in the sacrificial ritual, being there the general superintendent of the sacrifice. In favour of this view, he cites the fact that Vasiṣṭha is mentioned both as Purohita and as Brahman: at the sacrifice of Śunaḥśepa he served as Brahman, but he was the Purohita of [King] Sudās; Bṛhaspati is called the Purohita and the Brahman of the gods; and the Vasiṣṭhas who are Purohitas are also the Brahmans at the sacrifice. It is thus clear that the Brahman was often the Purohita; and it was natural that this should be the case when once the Brahman’s place became, as it did in later ritual, the most important position at the sacrifice. ... Later, no doubt, when the priestly activity ceased to centre in the song, the Purohita, with his skill in magic, became the Brahman, who also required magic to undo the errors of the sacrifice.”

In the ritual texts of the *Atharvaveda*

“The office of the *brahman*, the fourth priest at the *śrauta*-ceremonies, who oversees and corrects by means of expiatory formulas (*prāyaścitta*) the accidents and blunders of *hotar*, *udgātar*, and *adhvaryu*, is said to belong to an *Atharvavedin*, and the *Vaitānasūtra* in fact exhibits the *bhṛgvaṅgirovid* in possession of that office. ... [A] similar claim is advanced in respect to the office of the *purohita*. Again and again it is stated that the *purohita*, guru, or brahman of a king, the chaplain or house-priest, shall be conversant with the Atharvan writings, shall be an Atharvan priest ...”²³⁰

30 Bloomfield 1897: lviii.

Can we conclude from the above that the authors of the *Śāṅkhāyana-* and *Kauṣītaka-Gr̥hyasūtras*—and by extension, the authors of other *Gr̥hyasūtras* that include the *Atharvaveda* in their list of now four Vedas—accepted that there was a special link between the office of *purohita* and the *Atharvaveda*? It is useful to recall that certain *Dharmasūtras* emphasize the need of a *purohita* to be skilled in Atharvan formulas.³¹ The *Arthaśāstra*, too, does so.³²

Consider in this connection the following observation, drawn from the same article in the *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* (p. 8):

“In historical times [the Purohita] represented the real power of the kingship, and may safely be deemed to have exercised great influence in all public affairs, such as the administration of justice and the king’s conduct of business.”

Compare this with the characterization of a court of justice (*sabhā*) in the *Pāraskara-Gr̥hyasūtra* (3,13.2) as *āṅgirasī* “related to Aṅgiras or to the Aṅgirasas”. It is far from evident what Aṅgiras or the Aṅgirasas have to do with the court of justice, unless we consider that the author of this Sūtra assumed that Atharvan priests had a closer connection with the court than others. This would be a matter of course if the *brahman*-priests had come to be looked upon as particularly apt to play the role of royal *purohita*.³³

31 So *Yājñavalkya Dharmasāstra* 1,312; *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 11,17.

32 *Arthaśāstra* (ed. Kangle; tr. Olivelle) 1,9.9: *purohitam uditoditakulaśīlam sāṅge vede daive nimitte daṇḍanītyāṃ cābhivinītam āpadāṃ daivamānuṣīṅām atharvabhir upāyaiś ca pratikartāraṃ kurvīta* “He should appoint as Chaplain a man who comes from a very distinguished family and has an equally distinguished character, who is thoroughly trained in the Veda together with the limbs, in divine omens, and in government, and who could counteract divine and human adversities through Atharvan means.”

33 On the distinction between civil and criminal courts in ancient India, see now Olivelle 2012.

The *Atharvaveda* in the *Mahābhārata*

The *Atharvaveda* occupies a respected position in the *Mahābhārata*, too. About the general relationship of this epic to Vedic literature we can do no better than cite *The Sanskrit Epics* by John Brockington (1998: 7–9):

“References to the Vedas in general terms are found not uncommonly in the *Mahābhārata* and are spread relatively evenly. Anything more explicit, even the listing of the three or four Vedas or mention of Vedas along with Vedāṅgas, tends to be concentrated in the more didactic or otherwise later parts of the text. Thus, ... the sound of the *Yajur*, *Ṛg* and *Sāma Vedas* along with prose—in the context probably the Brāhmaṇas are meant—rises from hermitages at 3,27.3ab;³⁴ the four Vedas with the Aṅgas and Upāṅgas are put on a par with truth at 3,61.16ab;³⁵ ... the *Sāma*, *Yajur* and *Ṛg Vedas* were absent in the Kṛtayuga but in the Dvāparayuga there are four Vedas and men know four, three, two, one or none (3,148.13a³⁶ and 26–27,³⁷ in the *Tīrthayātrāparvan*); Nārāyaṇa declares to Mārkaṇḍeya that he produced the *Ṛgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and the *Atharvans* at 3,187.14ab.³⁸ In ... Nārada’s description

34 MBh 3,27.3:

yajuṣām ṛcām ca sāmnam ca gadyānām caiva sarvaśaḥ |
āsīd uccāryamāṇānām nisvano hṛdayaṅgamaḥ || 3 ||

35 MBh 3,61.16:

catvāra ekato vedāḥ sāṅgopāṅgāḥ savistarāḥ |
svadhītā mānavaśreṣṭha satyam ekaṃ kilaikataḥ || 16 ||

36 MBh 3,138.12cd–13ab:

nāsan kṛtayuge tāta tadā na krayavikrayāḥ || 12 ||
na sāmayaḥkṛtvarṇāḥ kriyā nāsīc ca mānavī |

37 MBh 3,148.26–27:

dvāpare ‘pi yuge dharmo dvibhāgonāḥ pravartate |
viṣṇur vai pītātām yāti caturdhā veda eva ca || 26 ||
tato ‘nye ca caturvedās trivedās ca tathāpare |
dvivedās caikavedās cāpy anṛcaś ca tathāpare || 27 ||

38 MBh 3,187.14:

ṛgvedaḥ sāmavedaś ca yajurvedo ‘py atharvaṇaḥ |
mattaḥ prādurbhavanty ete mām eva praviśanti ca || 14 ||

of the celestial halls the *R̥gveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda*, as well as Upavedas and Vedāṅgas are there (2.11.23–24);³⁹ within the *Sanatsujātīya*, *brahman* is not in the *R̥g*, *Yajur*, *Atharva* or *Sāma Vedas* (5,44.21ab).⁴⁰ Alongside such listings of four Vedas, the following *pāda* giving just the three Vedas may be noted: *ṛco yajūṃṣi sāmāni* at 9,35.33a⁴¹ (in the less well known *Tīrthayātrāparvan* narrating Balarāma’s pilgrimage, which also refers to the muni Sārasvata’s recitation of the Vedas at 9,50.2–3⁴²) and 12,243.2c⁴³ (also at 1 App. 1.23 pr., and in different wording at 6,31.17d⁴⁴ and 12,230.8b⁴⁵). However, to set against this, there are a number of separate references to the *Atharvaveda*, of which perhaps the most notable is that the group of spells given to Kuntī by which she can bring the gods to her is revealed in the *Atharvaśiras*⁴⁶ (3,289.20cd);⁴⁷ others occur at

39 MBh 2,11.23:

ṛgvedaḥ sāmavedaś ca yajurvedaś ca pāṇḍava |
atharvavedaś ca tathā parvāṇi ca viśāṃ pate || 23 ||

40 MBh 5,44.21ab:

naivarkṣu tan na yajuḥṣu nāpy atharvasu na caiva dṛśyatya amaleṣu sāmasu |

41 MBh 9,35.33cd:

ṛco yajūṃṣi sāmāni manasā cintayan muniḥ |

42 MBh 9,50.3:

yatra dvādaśavārṣikyām anāvṛṣṭyām dvijottamān |
vedān adhyāpayām āsa purā sārasvato muniḥ || 3 ||

43 MBh 12,243.2:

sarvān vedān adhīyīta śuśrūṣur brahmacaryavān |
ṛco yajūṃṣi sāmāni na tena na sa brāhmaṇaḥ || 2 ||

44 MBh 6,31.17:

pitāham asya jagato mātā dhātā pitāmahaḥ |
vedyaṃ pavitram oṃkāra ṛk sāma yajur eva ca || 17 ||

45 MBh 12,230.8ab:

apṛthagdarśinaḥ sarve ṛksāmasu yajuḥṣu ca |

46 Note the variant *atharvāṅgirasi*, and cf. Bloomfield, 1897: xvii.

47 MBh 3,289.20–21ab:

tatas tām anavadyāṅgīm grāhayām āsa vai dvijah |
mantragrāmaṃ tadā rājann atharvaśirasi śrutam || 20 ||
taṃ pradāya tu rājendra kuntibhojam uvāca ha |

1,64.33⁴⁸; 5,18.7–8⁴⁹ (Atharvāṅgīrasa), 8,49.69ab (*atharvāṅgīrasī* [!] *hy eṣā śrutīnām uttamā śrutīḥ*), 13,10.34a (*atharvavede vede ca*, making a distinction between it and the rest) and 13,95.75c = 96.44c (with mention in the first half of the verse of Advaryu and Chandoga). ... [I]n the *Bhagavadgītā* Kṛṣṇa declares that he is the *Sāmaveda* of the Vedas (6,32.22ab)⁵⁰, the *pitṛmedha* is celebrated for the dead warriors with *sāmans* (11,26.39c, cf. *sāmnām ṛcām ca nādena* at 40a) and at 13,14.159ab the *Sāmaveda* is supreme among the Vedas, just as the *Śatarudrīya* is among the *Yajur* hymns.”

Brockington’s observations, though useful, have to be read with care, for they do not distinguish between different kinds of mantras (e.g. *ṛc*, *yajus*, *sāman*) and the Vedas that carry their names (e.g., *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*).⁵¹ If we concentrate on the latter, we find that none of the passages referred to merely enumerate the usual three Vedas (*Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Sāmaveda*), two of them mention four Vedas without specifying which ones are meant (3,61.16; 3,148.26), one enumerates the four Vedas as *Ṛgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* (2,11.23), and one gives the following enigmatic enumeration: *ṛgvedaḥ sāmavedaś ca yajurvedo ’py atharvaṇaḥ* (3,187.14). If

48 MBh 1,64.33:

*atharvavedaprarāḥ pūgayājñika saṃmatāḥ |
saṃhitām īrayanti sma padakramayutām tu te || 33 ||*

49 MBh 5,18.6–7ab:

*tatas tu bhagavān indraḥ prahr̥ṣtaḥ samapadyata |
varam ca pradadau tasmai atharvāṅgīrase tadā || 6 ||
atharvāṅgīrasaṃ nāma asmin vede bhaviṣyati |*

50 MBh 6,32.22ab (=BhG 10,22):

vedānām sāmavedo ’smi devānām asmi vāsavaḥ |

51 If we assume, with the *Mīmāṃsākoṣa* (VI p. 3089), that there are three and only three kinds of (Vedic) mantras — viz., *ṛc*, *yajus* and *sāman* —, then the mantras in the *Atharvaveda*, too, belong to these three categories. As a matter of fact, the *Atharvaveda* shares a fair number of mantras with the *Ṛgveda*. Note however that the authors of the *Mahābhārata* may not always strictly distinguish between mantras and Vedas; an example is 5,43.1ab: *ṛco yajūṃṣy adhīte yaḥ sāmavedaṃ ca yo dvijaḥ*.

we translate this, with Van Buitenen (1975: 591), as “*Rgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and the *Atharvans*” the suggestion is conveyed that the *Atharvaveda*, unlike the other Vedas, either did not exist, or was not thought of as a collection. This interpretation is however far from certain.⁵² Some of the passages that only refer to the *Atharvaveda* maintain the ambiguity as to its collected nature (3,289.20; 8,49.69). (Since the use of plural nouns, usually *atharvāṅgirasah*, to refer to the *Atharvaveda* continued for a long time, one should be careful in drawing chronological conclusions from it; see Bloomfield (1897: xvii). One, finally, speaks of the *Samhitā* of the *Atharvaveda* and its *Pada-* and *Kramapāṭha* (1,64.33: *saṃhitāṃ ... padakramayutāṃ*).⁵³ Here the *Atharvaveda* is clearly thought of as a collected whole.

Brockington’s sample of passages,⁵⁴ then, creates the impression that the *Atharvaveda* has in the *Mahābhārata* taken a place on a par with the three other Vedas, even though it is still sometimes referred to as if it was not yet a finished collection of hymns.⁵⁵

52 The normal plural of *atharvan* is *atharvāṅah* rather than *atharvaṅah*. We might therefore translate “the *Rgveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, the *Yajurveda* and [the Veda] of *Atharvan*”. Alternatively, we may interpret (with Bloomfield 1897: xxv) *atharvaṅah* as a variant of *ātharvaṅah*, in which case we have to translate “the *Rgveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharva[-Veda]*”.

53 Note that the word *saṃhitā* in Vedic literature always means *sandhi*, so that the *saṃhitā-pāṭha* of a Vedic text is its version with *sandhi*, different from its *pada-pāṭha* (version consisting of separate words) and other versions. The use of *saṃhitā* in this line from the *Mahābhārata* appears to be an early manifestation of the later usage, in which *saṃhitā* means “collection”.

54 We may add MBh 8,24.80–81, which mentions *Rgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *itihāsajurvedau* (!) and *atharvāṅgirasau*.

55 Similarly Bloomfield 1897: li: “The position of the Atharvan in the *Mahābhārata* may be characterised in the single statement that its importance as a Veda, and its canonicity, are finally and completely established.” Bloomfield 1897: lii gives a long list of *Mahābhārata* passages that mention the four Vedas, one of them being the *Atharvaveda*.

Back to the Bhārgavas

Since the *Mahābhārata* is at least in part a mythological text, it will be interesting to see which are the mythological sages prominently associated with the *Atharvaveda*. These are, above all, Atharvan, Aṅgiras and Bhṛgu. Of these three, the *Gopathabrāhmaṇa* (1,1.4–5 and 7–8) narrates that the first two were created by Brahmā, that twenty Atharvanic and Aṅgirasic descendent sages emanated from them, and that finally the Ātharvaṇa Veda was produced by the Atharvans, the Āṅgirasa Veda by the Aṅgirasas.⁵⁶ The compound *bhṛgvaṅgirasah* makes its appearance later, and only in Atharvan texts. Bhṛgu has the tendency to replace Atharvan in the Atharvanic tradition.⁵⁷

We know that Bhṛgu and his descendants play a major role in the *Mahābhārata*. However, Aṅgiras and his descendants do so, too. Brockington (1998: 156) says the following about it:

“N. J. Shende, from a count of references to individual brāhmins, demonstrates the greater frequency of mention of the Āṅgirasas, even than of the Bhṛgus.⁵⁸ To these may be added the narrative by Mārkaṇḍeya about the origin of the fires and the role of Aṅgiras as an Atharvan. Shende therefore modifies Sukthankar’s hypotheses by suggesting that ‘the Bhṛgvaṅgirasas were jointly responsible for the final redaction of the Mahābhārata’.”

From among the major Brahmanical families, the Bhṛgus are mentioned 1 500 times in the *Mahābhārata*, the Aṅgirasas 3 200 times, and each of the remaining families less than a hundred times. Shende draws from this a conclusion similar to Sukthankar’s. He concludes that the Āṅgirasas were co-responsible for the redaction of the *Mahābhārata*. Since he does not contest Sukthankar’s findings, he ends up with a joint responsibility, shared by Bhārgavas and Āṅgirasas.

56 Bloomfield 1897: xxii–xxiii.

57 Bloomfield 1897: xxvi–xxvii.

58 Reference to Shende 1943.

I believe that enough preparatory work has been done by now to see that this conclusion is not the only possible one. The fact that the Bhārgavas and the Āṅgirasas, just these two, outcompete all other Brahmanical families in the *Mahābhārata* can hardly be historical coincidence. These two families represent, in the Indian imagination of that time, the supernatural powers associated with the formulas of the *Atharvaveda*.⁵⁹ We have seen that these powers, rather than those associated with the solemn ritual, were vital for the Brahmins of that time to regain a position of respect in society. The *Mahābhārata*, too, was meant to serve that purpose. It could do so by showing, through the intermediary of stories, what enormous powers Brahmins possessed. The powers concerned were primarily those associated with *atharvan* formulas, and were therefore most appropriately exemplified through the feats of those who were particularly closely connected with those powers, viz., the Bhārgavas and the Āṅgirasas.

Recall that the intended audience of the epic included primarily worldly rulers, those whom the Brahmins would call *kṣatriyas*. Brahmins had to get the message across that they, in spite of appearances, had powers comparable to or even exceeding those of kings. The *Mahābhārata* shows this more than clearly by recounting what their most powerful representatives had done. These most powerful representatives of the Brahmins were, and could not but be, Bhārgavas and Āṅgirasas, the masters *par excellence* of *atharvanic* powers.

It is easy to show this for the Bhārgavas, who have received more scholarly attention than the Āṅgirasas. The most famous example is the Bhārgava Rāma Jāmadagnya, who destroyed all the *kṣatriyas* thrice seven times over.⁶⁰ This historical fact—it is presented as one—“is mentioned *ten* times, in nearly identical form” in the *Mahābhārata*; what is more, “the humiliation of the pride of the *kṣatriyas* by the

59 It is not to be forgotten that Bhārgava and Āṅgirasa are gotra names, not confined to Brahmins with links to the *Atharvaveda*; cf. Proferes 2003; 2007: 6–13; Mahadevan 2011.

60 Cf. Goldman 1977: 18 f.; Fitzgerald 2002.

Bhārgava Rāma is mentioned about a *score* of times.⁶¹ This should be enough to make clear to any ruler that displeasing a Brahmin might not necessarily endanger the lives of *all* the *kṣatriyas*, it might yet carry serious risks for him. The story of the Bhārgava Aurva, who almost committed a similar act of total destruction, would further remind him that the only way to avoid such a fate was mollification of the Brahmin concerned.⁶²

More frequently the Bhārgavas, and the Āṅgirasas with them, use other means to guarantee success in battle to those whose sides they are on, viz., secret magical weapons.

These same stories recall that Brahmins can basically do what they like, and get away with it. The Bhārgavas provide, once again, a particular clear example. To cite Goldman (1977: 5):

“The central concerns of the Bhṛgu appear from the mythology to have included death, violence, sorcery, confusion and violation of class-roles (*varṇāśramadharmā*), intermarriage with other *varṇas* (*varṇasaṃkara*), and open hostility to the gods themselves. In addition, several of the Bhārgava sages are shown in the epic to have engaged with impunity in such activities as theft, drinking liquor, and killing a woman, acts that are condemned unequivocally in the law texts as especially improper for brahmins.”

This shows that Brahmins have the power to do what they please, and it is only by their good grace that they often follow the rules which they have themselves laid down in their treatises.

All this only makes sense, of course, if we keep in mind that the ideal audience of the epic is not constituted by other Brahmins, but by worldly rulers.⁶³ Brahmins are not encouraging each other to break their self-imposed rules; they rather remind their rulers that they can

61 Sukthankar 1936: 65.

62 See Goldman 1977: 11 f.

63 According to Hegarty (2012: 189), “the Mahābhārata successfully institutionalized itself to the extent that it was used by kings and Brahmins

choose not to obey them, and there is nothing anyone can do to stop them.

It follows from our preceding reflections that the important roles played in the *Mahābhārata* by Bhārgavas and Āṅgirasas has nothing to do with the participation of these two groups of Brahmins in the composition, or rather brahmanisation, of this text, and all the more with the image its redactors wished to project of Brahmins. This image was best served by an increased emphasis on the brahmanical powers that were associated with the *Atharvaveda*, and consequently by the regular presence in the stories of the Brahmins who were most intimately connected with this Veda.⁶⁴ The need to project this image rather than another had much to do with the time in which the composition of the *Mahābhārata* as we know it took place, when Brahmanism had to reinvent itself in order to defend itself against the menaces it underwent from the side of rulers who did not necessarily appreciate their skills.

There is, then, a chronological side to the explanation here offered for the predominance of Bhārgavas and Āṅgirasas in the *Mahābhārata*: its composition (or brahmanical redaction) is preferably to be situated when revised Brahmanism began its ascendance, i.e., during the period following the collapse of the Maurya Empire, i.e., after 185 BCE. This is in agreement with the date that Witzel (2005: esp. p. 54) arrives at on the basis of the combined evidence dealing with foreigners and that of foreign loanwords in the text: around 100 BCE.⁶⁵ However, this obliges us to consider some other evidence that, at first sight, would seem to disagree with this date: Pāṇini's supposed acquaintance with the *Mahābhārata*.

for acts of both self-legitimation and selfexploration for centuries, indeed millennia, to come.”

64 So Hildebeitel 1999. See also von Simson 2011: 642 f.

65 On the final redaction of the *Mahābhārata*, see Olivelle 2012a (“at the earliest during the first centuries of the common era”); further Bronkhorst 2011; 2012.

Pāṇini and the *Mahābhārata*

Pāṇini has a rule about the accentuation of the compound *mahā-bhārata*. This rule is P. 6,2.38 (*mahān vrīhyaparāhṇagrṣṭīśvāsajābālabhāra-bhārata-hailihilarauravapravṛddheṣu*). It is briefly discussed in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, who does not however mention the compound *mahā-bhārata*. Since the form *bhārata* does not figure at the beginning of the rule, and manuscripts of the *Mahābhāṣya* often cite only the beginnings of rules, it is conceivable that at the time of Patañjali this rule did not yet account for the accent of *mahā-bhārata*.⁶⁶ A priori this seems however unlikely, because it is hard to believe that someone more recent, who presumably lived at a time when accents had disappeared, would be concerned about the accent of this compound. It seems therefore reasonable to suppose that Patañjali, and presumably Pāṇini, knew the word *mahā-bhārata*.

Scholars have concluded that Pāṇini knew the (or an) epic that carries that name. Asko Parpola (2002: 361), for example, concludes from this and other facts that “the war was over and the epic in existence by c. 400–350 B.C.”⁶⁷ Alf Hiltebeitel (2011: 113 n. 28), on the other hand, finds Pāṇini's reference to *mahā-bhārata* “baffling”, and wonders whether “he refers to some prewritten conceptualization—unless we have an older *Mahābhārata* text than most have thought ...”.

However, what is the meaning of this compound *mahā-bhārata*? No information of that nature can be extracted from Pāṇini's rule. It is about its accent and about nothing else. Moreover, the word *Bhārata* can refer to various things, as any dictionary will tell. It can, for example, refer to the author of two Ṛgvedic hymns. *Mahā-Bhārata* might

66 So von Simson 2011: 646–647.

67 Cited in Witzel 2005: 69 n. 168. Witzel adds that “exactly what kind of (Mahā) *Bhārata* may have been in existence in Pāṇini's time is very much open to debate.” For a presentation and criticism of the claim that a 24 000 verse *Bhārata* preceded a 100 000 verse *Mahābhārata*, see Hiltebeitel 2005: 457; for the opposite opinion, see Fitzgerald 2010, esp. p. 110.

then conceivably be a designation of the “great Bhārata”, an eulogistic expression for this *ṛṣi*.⁶⁸

This last possibility finds some kind of support in a para-Vedic text that uses this expression. *Āśvalāyanagr̥hyasūtra* 3,4.4 contains an enigmatic enumeration of names:

sumantu-jaimini-vaiśampāyana-paila-sūtra-bhāṣya-bhārata-mahābhārata-dharmācāryā jānanti-bāhavi-gārgya-gautama-śākalya-bābhavya-māṇḍavya-māṇḍūkeyā gārgī vācakanvī vaḍavā prātītheyī sulabhā maitreyī kaholaṃ kauṣītakaṃ mahākauṣītakaṃ paiṅgyaṃ mahāpaiṅgyaṃ suyajnaṃ śāṃkhāyanam aitareyaṃ mahaitareyaṃ śākalaṃ bāṣkalaṃ sujātavaktram audavāhiṃ mahaudavāhiṃ saujāmiṃ śaunakam āśvalāyanaṃ ye cānye ācāryās te sarve tṛpyantv iti.

It consists of two parts, the first one containing nominatives, the second one accusatives. Oldenberg (1886: 220 n. 4) explains this in a footnote, following the commentator Nārāyaṇa: “The names from Kahola Kauṣītak[a] down to Āśvalāyana stand in the accusative; *tarpayāmi*, ‘I satiate N. N.’ is to be supplied.” The *sūtra* ends with the words: *ye cānye ācāryās te sarve tṛpyantv iti* “and whatsoever other teachers there are, may they all satiate themselves” (tr. Oldenberg). This suggests that the enumeration contains the names of teachers and nothing else. Most items are indeed names of teachers, or can be understood that way. Oldenberg, in his translation, yet identifies six of them as being names of texts: “the Sūtras, the Bhāṣyas, the Bhārata, the Mahābhārata, ... the Śākala (text), the Bāṣkala (text)”. He is no doubt right in the case of Sūtra and Bhāṣya (even though it is not certain that the

68 This was indeed Albrecht Weber’s opinion: “In Pāṇini the word ‘Mahā-Bhārata’ does indeed occur; not, however, as denoting the epic of this name, but as an appellative to designate any individual of special distinction among the Bhāratas, like Mahā-Jābāla, -Hailihila ...” (Weber 1878: 185). Weber is careful to add: “Still, we do find names mentioned in Pāṇini which belong specially to the story of the Mahā-Bhārata — namely, Yudhishtira, Hāstinapura, Vāsudeva, Arjuna, Andhaka-Vṛiṣṇayas, Droṇa (?); so that the legend must in any case have been current in his day, possibly even in a poetical shape.”

plural translation Sūtras and Bhāṣyas is justified: the words occur in the middle of a compound ...*sūtrabhāṣya*...). Three of the remaining four names identified as texts by Oldenberg—Bhārata, Śākala, Bāṣkala—can be used for both persons and texts.⁶⁹ The same may also be true for the name *Mahābhārata*, for the enumeration prefixes *mahā-* to a number of personal names: Mahākauṣītaka, Mahāpaiṅgya, Mahaitareya, Mahaudavāhi. It follows that Oldenberg’s interpretation of these four names can be questioned, especially in view of the context considered.

The context admittedly contains some other elements which seem to point in the opposite direction: Sumantu, Jaimini, Vaiśampāyana and Paila are names known from the *Mahābhārata*: they are the names of four pupils of Vyāsa, the “author” of the epic.⁷⁰

An almost identical enumeration occurs at *Kauṣītakaḡrhyasūtra* 2,5.3. Here the personal names given with and without *mahā-* are: (Mahā-)Kauṣītaka, (Mahā-)Aitareya, (Mahā-)Paiṅgya, (Mahā-)Śāmbavaka. *Mahābhārata* occurs only in this form, with *mahā-*; Bhārata does not figure in this list, which begins: *sumantu-jaimini-vaiśampāyana-paila-sūtra-bhāṣya-mahābhārata-dharmācāryāḥ jānanti-bāhavi-gārgya-gautama-śākalya-bābhravya-māṇḍavya-māṇḍūkeyāḥ ...* The corresponding passage in the *Śāṅkhāyanagḡrhyasūtra* (4,10.3) has *sumantuḥ jaimini-vaiśampāyana-paila-sūtra-bhāṣya-gārgya-bibhrubābhravya-māṇḍu-māṇḍavyāḥ ...*, without Bhārata and *Mahābhārata*, but with (Mahā-)Kauṣītaki, (Mahā-)Aitareya, (Mahā-)Paiṅgya, (Mahā-)Audavāhi.⁷¹

It follows that these texts use the compound *mahā-bhārata* in an ambiguous manner. It is not certain that they refer to the Sanskrit epic

69 For Śākala as the name for a person see, e.g., *R̥gveda-Prātiśākhya* (ed. Müller 1869) 76 (p. XXV): *ukāraś cetikaraṇena yukto rakto 'prkto drāghitaḥ śākalena* “Und das u, wenn es mit iti verbunden, nasalisiert, ohne Consonanten, und vom Śākala verlängert ist, ist ebenfalls pragrhya”; further Bronkhorst 1982: 89 n. 15.

70 See, e.g., Tsuchida 2008: 13 n. 24.

71 Hopkins (1901: 390) concludes that “when the words [Bhārata and Mahābhārata] do actually occur [in the Gḡrhyasūtras] they are plainly additions to the earlier list.”

in its present or some other form. In the case of Pāṇini no help is provided to make a reliable decision. In the case of the *Āśvalāyana-grhyasūtra* the context provides some elements to think that a person rather than a text is designated. The situation is less clear in the *Kauṣītaka-grhyasūtra*, and the absence of both *Bhārata* and *Mahābhārata* in the *Śāṅkhāyana-grhyasūtra* adds further obscurity. In spite of this, we may conclude that the evidence that a text called *Mahābhārata* existed at the time of Pāṇini, presumably during the second half of the fourth century BCE, is not fully compelling.

There is another aspect of the question that must be considered. Pāṇini's rule 6,2.38 determines the accent of the compound *mahā-bhārata*. This is not surprising if this expression concerns a Vedic seer, but somewhat harder to understand if it is the name of the Sanskrit epic. Let us see what authorities have to say about the disappearance of Vedic accents.

First Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat (1992: 31–32):

[Le sanskrit] perd un trait important, le ton, encore enseigné pour la langue parlée par Patañjali et encore prononcé par lui (pour les règles de ton il donne ses exemples en prononçant les mots accentués). Après lui le ton ne subsistera que pour les textes védiques appris par cœur selon les antiques méthodes de récitation. Cette perte est peut-être la marque d'un changement de statut du sanskrit. C'est la perte d'un trait particulièrement vivant de la langue et le signe de son passage à l'état de langue seconde, fruit d'une éducation spécifique, non résultat de la naissance. En effet dans l'apprentissage d'une seconde langue la prononciation est la chose la plus difficile à acquérir à la perfection, précisément parce qu'il est malaisé de se débarrasser de traits de prononciation de sa langue maternelle. ... Une altération de la prononciation aussi grave que la perte du ton chez les lettrés qui en connaissent l'existence et les règles par la grammaire de Pāṇini ne peut s'expliquer que par l'influence d'une langue première ne comportant pas de tonalité, et donc le passage du sanskrit à l'état de

langue seconde. Quand ce changement s'est-il produit? Il n'y a pas de date ponctuelle pour cela, mais la transformation a dû se faire progressivement dans les premiers siècles après l'ère chrétienne.

Burrow (1973: 115) has similar ideas:

“When exactly the accent died out in ordinary spoken use it is impossible to say with certainty. It was certainly a living thing in the time of Patañjali and even later than Patañjali, Śāntanava treated of the subject in his *Phīṣūtra*. According to the author of the Kāśikā commentary (c. A.D. 700) the use of accentuation was optional in the spoken language, which probably means that in practice it was no longer used at this time. On the whole it is unlikely that the use of accentuation survived long after the Christian era.”

To sum up: No one knows for sure when the Vedic accent stopped being used in Sanskrit (and we are entitled to have doubts as to how “living” the Vedic accent was at the time of Patañjali).⁷²

However, we do know that the *Mahābhārata* was not recited with accent. Indeed, the text itself describes the “recitation of Vedic texts with the accents taught by the Śikṣās (*svaraḥ śaikṣaḥ*, 9.35[!].35b . . .)” (Brockington 1998: 10), indicating thereby that non-Vedic texts—including the *Mahābhārata* itself—were *not* recited in this manner. It is somewhat difficult to believe that a text in Sanskrit without accent had an accented name. We are of course free to speculate that there had been an earlier *Mahābhārata* in accented Sanskrit, with an accented name. Such speculation is not based on any evidence known to me, and is indeed unnecessary, given that the compound Mahā-Bhārata may refer to a Vedic seer.

72 Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding, Patañjali *did* recite the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* with accents; see Bronkhorst 2009: 270 ff.

Conclusion

There is no reason to insist that Pāṇini did not yet know the *Mahābhārata* in some form or other, but this is not certain. It seems however clear that the text as we now know it, or a text sufficiently similar to it, did not come into existence until the second or first century BCE. This text had been heavily brahmanised, not by Bhārgavas or another known group of Brahmins, but by redactors who used the text to pass the message that Brahmins should not be messed around with, that Brahmins have enormous hidden powers and are essentially above the law. One of the weapons in their newly formed arsenal was the *Atharvaveda*, a Veda whose constituent mantras were collected during this very period. This Veda provided the background and basis for the magical powers that Brahmins claimed for themselves, and it is not surprising that Brahmins who had a particularly close association with this Veda—primarily the Bhārgavas and the Āṅgirasas—frequently appear in the narrative portions of the *Mahābhārata*.

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Abbreviations

AiBr	Aitareya Brāhmaṇa
AN	Aṅguttara-Nikāya, ed. R. Morris, E. Hardy, 5 vols., London 1885-1900 (PTS); vol. 6 (Indexes, by M. Hunt and C. A. F. Rhys Davids), London 1910 (PTS)
ĀpŚS	Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra
ASS	Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series, Poona
Avś	Avadānaśataka, ed. J. S. Speyer, St. Petersburg 1906-1909 (BBu 3)
BĀU	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
BBu	Bibliotheca Buddhica, St. Petersburg (Leningrad)
BHSD	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary by F. Edgerton
BORI	Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona
ChU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
Dīp	Dīpavaṃsa, ed. H. Oldenberg, London 1879
Divy	Divyāvadāna, ed. E. B. Cowell, R. A. Neil, Cambridge 1886
DN	Dīghanikāya, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, J. E. Carpenter, 3 vols. 1890-1911 (PTS)
GobhGS	Gobhila Gṛhya Sūtra
Jā	Jātaka, together with its Commentary, ed. V. Fausbøll, 6 vols., London 1877-1896; vol. 7 (Index, D. Andersen), 1897
JBr	Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa
ArthŚ	Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra, ed. R. P. Kangle, second edition, Bombay 1969
KauṣBr	Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa

- MahāBh Patañjali, (Vyākaraṇa-)Mahābhāṣya, ed. F. Kielhorn, Bombay 1880-1885
- MBh Mahābhārata (MBh[-CE])
- Mil Milindapañha, ed. V. Trenckner, London 1880
- Mīmāṃsākoṣa Mīmāṃsākoṣaḥ, 7 parts, ed. Kevalanandasaraswati, Wai 1952-1966
- MN Majjhima-Nikāya, ed. V. Trenckner, R. Chalmers, 3 vols., London 1888-1899 (PTS)
- Mvu Mahāvastu-Avadāna, ed. Émile Senart, 3 vols., Paris 1882-1897
- P.⁷³ Pāṇinian sūtra
- PTS Pali Text Society
- PTSD The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, W. Stede, London 1921
- Sn Suttanipāta, ed. D. Andersen, H. Smith, London 1913 (PTS)
- SN Saṃyutta-Nikāya, ed. L. Feer, 5 vols., London 1884-1898 (PTS), vol. 6 (Indexes by C.A.F. Rhys Davids), London 1904 (PTS)
- ŚBr Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (Mādhyandina)
- TanVār Tantravārttika of Kumārilabhaṭṭa (ASS, 97)
- Th Theragāthā, in: Thera- and Therī-Gāthā, ed. H. Oldenberg and R. Pischel, rev. K. R. Norman, L. Alsdorf, London, 2nd ed. 1966 (PTS)
- TI Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō or Taishō Issaikyō, 100 vols., Tōkyō 1924 ff.
- Viy Viyāhapannatti (Jaina-Āgama-Series 4)

Sažetak na hrvatskome

Tko je sastavio *Mahābhāratu*, kada i zašto?

Ovaj rad ispituje Sukthankarovu tezu o ulozi Bhārgava u sastavljanju *Mahābhārate* i predlaže drugi način tumačenja Sukthankarovih argumenata za svoju tezu. Skreće se pozornost na vezu između Bhārgava

73 Readers will kindly bear with this “inconsistent, confusing and unsatisfactory” (Houben 2012: 187 n. 51) abbreviation.

i *Atharvavede*, te na važnost koju *Atharvaveda* zadobiva u *Gṛhyasūtrama* i *Mahābhārati*. *Atharvaveda* igra središnju ulogu u načinu na koji se brahmanizam ponovno afirmirao nakon nestanka carstva Maurya, osobito u obnovljenom odnosu između brahmana i vladara (*kṣatriya*). Rad završava nekim zapažanjima o *Mahābhārati* u Pāṇinijevoj gramatici i u nekim *Gṛhyasūtrama*.

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Edited by
Ivan Andrijanić
Sven Sellmer

General Editor
Mislav Ježić
Fellow of the Croatian Academy
of Sciences and Arts (Zagreb)