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The historiography of Brahmanism

1 Classical Brahmanism

'Brahmanism' is the term I use to refer to a movement that arose out of Vedic religion. Vedic religion was what the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann might call a 'primary religion' (Assmann 2003). It was a priestly religion, not unlike the priestly religions of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. As such it was indissociably linked to one single culture, to one single society, and to one single language. It had a close association with the rulers of the society to which it belonged, for whom it provided ritual services. Like other primary religions, Vedic religion had no exclusive truth claims of a religious nature, and did not try to make converts. Like other primary religions, it depended for its survival on the continued existence of the society to which it belonged.

The society to which it belonged did not continue to exist. Beginning in the fourth century BCE northern India became unified into an empire, or rather a sequence of two empires, the first one under the Nanda dynasty, the second under the Mauryas. The centre of these two empires lay in the eastern part of the Ganges plane, outside the realm of traditional Vedic religion, which was centred in its western part. Therefore, its rulers did not continue the Vedic traditional sacrificial cult. The degree of centralization, especially of the Maurya empire, though weak by modern standards, was high enough to discontinue traditional rulership in the Vedic heartland. This meant the end of traditional support for Vedic religion. Without regular and systematic support from the rulers, the Vedic ritual tradition was threatened. Vedic religion, if it wanted to survive at all, had to reinvent itself.

Vedic religion did reinvent itself, and the result is what I call 'Brahmanism' (or 'the new Brahmanism', to distinguish it from the preceding Vedic period). Brahmins, i.e., the successors (and, at least in theory, descendants) of the Vedic priests, now offered their services to new customers, also outside their traditional heartland. Some of these services were continuations of the elaborate rituals they had performed in the good old days, but the demand for these expensive sacrifices was now limited. New services were however added. These included other uses of the Brahmins' supernatural powers, such as predicting the future through reading the stars and bodily signs. Ritual services related to major

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transitions in the lives of individuals (birth, death, weddings, etc.) were on offer, too. Brahmins also developed a vision of society, how it should be, and how it should be run, and offered counselling services to rulers.

We know that Brahmanism, this reinvented form of Vedic religion, became extraordinarily successful, and that without the help of an empire, military expansion, or even religious missionary activity. Brahmanical notions spread from a rather limited area during the last centuries preceding the Common Era and ended up, less than a thousand years later, imposing themselves all over the Indian subcontinent and in much of Southeast Asia. One factor that may have played a major role in this remarkable expansion is the spreading conviction among rulers that they could not risk to rule their kingdom without the supernatural and practical advice that Brahmins could provide.

Brahmanism was much concerned with the image it projected of itself. Its representatives, the Brahmins, had to live exemplary lives, especially in terms of ritual purity, which became a major issue. This affected almost all aspects of a Brahmin's life, and included purity of descent: with few, precisely specified exceptions, the only way to become a Brahmin is through birth from parents who are both pure Brahmins.

There is another aspect of the self-projected image of Brahmanism, and this one has a direct bearing on the theme of this volume. Brahmanism projected an image of its history that is, in its basic outline, extremely simple. Brahmanism, in this image, has always been there and does not change. Indeed, it made this claim with regard to the world, but also with regard to the corpus of texts it preserved, the *Veda*, and its sacred language, Sanskrit: they had all been there since beginningless time. There is therefore no such thing as a founder of Brahmanism, and indeed, the historical reconstruction of Brahmanism I just presented, of its reinvention as a response to political changes that had taken place in northern India, all this has no place in the manner Brahmanism visualized its own past. Brahmanism had always been there, and had neither been reinvented nor otherwise adapted to changing circumstances.

This particular vision of the past found its perhaps most striking expression in the school of Vedic interpretation, *Mimāṃsā*, that may be regarded as close to the most orthodox, and orthoprax, form of brahmanical culture. The Vedic corpus of texts, I had occasion to observe, was looked upon as beginningless, and therefore authorless. Brahmanical students learnt to recite a portion of this literature from a teacher, who had learnt it from his teacher, who in his turn had learnt it from an earlier teacher, and so on without beginning. No one had composed this literature or any of its parts, and this conviction was the basis of an intricate interpretative strategy. The fact that the *Veda* had no author, for example, implied that it was pure word, not soiled by human (or divine) interference,

and therefore necessarily faultless. Faults can occur in verbal communication, but analysis shows that such faults result from the speaker's shortcomings: speakers may wish to mislead their interlocutors, or may not be properly informed about the situation they talk about. In the case of the Veda, there is no author who may wish to mislead, or who may not be properly informed; no faults therefore attach to the Veda. Numerous further consequences were drawn from the presumed authorlessness of the Veda, and a complicated technique of analysis was based on it for which the *Mimāṃsā* remained famous until today.

The beginninglessness of the Veda had another consequence. The Veda could not possibly refer to any historical event. It could not do so, because it existed already before the historical event concerned took place. Passages that seem to describe or refer to historical events had to be reinterpreted in such a manner that they no longer do so.

Anonymity and absence of historical events was in this manner anchored in the Veda, the corpus of texts indissociably associated with Brahmanism. It is possible – and Sheldon Pollock has actually argued – that the impersonal and non-referential nature of *Mimāṃsā* (remember that the Veda has no author) is partly responsible for the impersonal and non-referential nature of most of Sanskrit literature.¹ However, this is not the whole story, far from it.

2 The end of time

Two things happened that had a profound effect on the vision of history of at least some Brahmins. On the one hand a series of historical events during the centuries surrounding the beginning of the Common Era forced them to rethink their position.² This new challenge was combined with a new historical scheme that came to be adopted in Brahmanism during this same period.

¹ Cf. Pollock 1989, 610: 'When the dominant hermeneutic of the Vedas eliminated the possibility of historical referentiality, any text seeking recognition of its truth claims – any text seeking to participate in brahmanical discourse at all – was required to exclude precisely this referential sphere. Discursive texts that came to be composed under the sign of the Veda eliminated historical referentiality and with it all possibility of historiography'. Roy W. Perrett criticizes this view (Perrett 1999, 314f.).

² Strictly speaking I do not, of course, know whether the same Brahmins who initially believed in the eternity of the world then adopted a different scheme. Different (groups of) Brahmins may have held, or adopted, different positions. Or the new scheme was added onto the old one: series of Yugas succeed each other for ever from beginningless time. Eltschinger informs me that the *Yogācārabhūmi* refers twice to Brahmins that are *kaliyugika*. This suggests that a

A series of catastrophes befell Brahmanism during the final centuries preceding the Common Era. After the collapse of the Mauryan empire, around 185 BCE, the north of India suffered a succession of foreign invasions. The Indo-Greeks were among the first to extend their power on the ruins of the Mauryan empire. Indo-Scythian (or Śaka, to use the Indian term) invasions followed soon. The result was a breakdown of society. For the Brahmins this was felt to be a breakdown of the brahmanical order of society. A number of texts give expression to the brahmanical disarray during this period. The most important from among these is the so-called *Yuga Purāṇa*,³ which describes the events in the form of a prophecy. It does so in great detail, and in this respect it is quite unique in early India (Parasher 1991, 239). It mentions the Greeks (*yavana*) and the Śakas and the war and destruction these invaders bring. Most interesting from our present perspective is that it views these disasters as indicators of the approaching end of an era, of a Yuga. The *Yuga Purāṇa* elaborates this notion by distinguishing between four Yugas that succeed each other, each succeeding one being worse than the one that precedes.⁴ The invasions of the Greeks and the Śakas take place at, and signify, the end of the last of these four Yugas, the Kali-Yuga. The text concludes with an indication that a new series of four Yugas will begin soon.⁵

It seems clear from this text that its author really believed that the end of the Kali-Yuga was at hand (Mitchiner 2002, 86; González-Reimann 2002, 98–9; id. 2009, 417). He thought it would take place soon after the invasions of the

sub-group of Brahmins may be at stake. A passage in the late *Siddhāntamuktāvalī* (which is to be dated between 1550 and 1650 CE, depending on whether one accepts Kṛṣṇadāsa Sārvabhauma or Viśvanātha Nyāyasiddhānta Pañcānana as its author) still confronts a critic who does not believe in the creation and destruction of the world; in response it points out that the destruction of the world has been taught in the Scriptures; cf. Wada 1995, 123f.: *na ca pralaya eva nāstīti kutah sargādir iti vācyam, pralayasyāgameṣu pratipādyatvāt.*

³ The *Yuga Purāṇa* is really part of a longer work called *Gārgīya-jyotiṣa* (and other names; see Mitchiner 2002, 1f.). Another part of this work is studied in Kenneth G. Zysk's forthcoming *Physiognomy in the Gārgīyajyotiṣa*.

⁴ The idea that there is a beginning and a violent end to our world fits in with what Witzel calls 'Laurasian mythology', which covers most of the mythologies of Eurasia and the Americas; even the notion of the Four Ages is Laurasian according to him (Witzel 2012, 86f.). The idea of an eternal world, without beginning and without end, does not find a place in Laurasian mythology, and looks more like an intellectual construct.

⁵ This circumstance allows us to use the expression 'millenarianism' here (see Thapar 2000). Note however that Christian millennialism 'describes the hope for a final "Golden Age" to come *before the end*' (McGinn 2002, 136; my emphasis). The term 'millenarianism' can no longer be appropriately applied to the classical Purāṇic vision of history, which we will consider below.

Śakas, and this is indeed the time when the text must have been composed.⁶ Other accounts of the impending end of time have been preserved, as portions of larger texts. The *Mahābhārata*, for example, contains a prophecy about the end of the Kali-Yuga, in the form of a discussion between King Yudhiṣṭhīra and the sage Mārkaṇḍeya.⁷ It adds to the list of oppressive ruling dynasties, and one of these (the Ābhīras) appears to justify the conclusion that this prophecy was written, or given its present shape, in 250 CE or later (Mitchiner 2002, 46).

This concrete prophecy may be a late addition of the *Mahābhārata*, but clearly earlier portions were very much aware of the notion of the end of the Yuga,⁸ for the *yugānta* is frequently invoked in comparisons (as shown in González-Reimann 2002, 64–73). These comparisons give us a clear image of how the end of the Yuga was thought of:

It is a time of great destruction, caused mainly by natural forces: torrential rains, implied by the rolling clouds and the thunder; earthquakes, hinted at by the shaking produced by Arjuna's conch as well as by the fallen guardians of the quarters; terrible winds ...; and an intense, resplendent Sun; but most of all fire, an all-consuming fire that destroys everything. There are also comets or meteors, as well as negative planetary configurations. ... In the Epic ... this destruction is often associated with the god Rudra (Śiva), who ... is said to rage at *yugānta*. (González-Reimann 2002, 71).

⁶ Second half of the first century BCE, according to Mitchiner 2002, 93. Interestingly, the Vikrama era, which begins ‘in the autumn of year 58/57 or in spring 57/56 BCE’, is called *kṛta* in early inscriptions; its first inscriptional occurrence dates from 239 CE (D. R. Bhandarkar in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* vol. III, revised edition, 187f.; Falk 2007, 131). *Kṛta* is, of course, also the name of the first of the four Yugas, and therefore of the beginning of a new cycle. Is this a coincidence? Indian tradition links this era to a King Vikramāditya who presumably was victorious over the Śakas in that year (Mitchiner 2002, 81f.; González-Reimann 2002, 99; Witzel 2003, 95f.; Kulke, Rothermund 1998, 72f.). Understandably, already Bhandarkar (*ibid.*, 197f.) considered the possibility that the *Kṛta* era might have been thought of as the new *Kṛta*-Yuga. R. S. Sharma states: ‘It is argued that the Kali description of the *Yuga Purāṇa* belongs to c. 50 BC but the Purana seems to have been a work of the third century AD’ (Sharma 1982, 202f., n. 79; *id.* 2001, 62, n. 97, with a reference to Dhruva 1930). Dhruva himself, however, dates the text ‘to the beginnings of the first century BC, that is to say, to the first or the second decade thereof’ (Dhruva 1930, 45).

⁷ Mhbh 3.186–9. Here, and only here, the *Mahābhārata* directly describes the end of the Kali-Yuga (using the expression *yugānta*; everywhere else this expression is used in comparisons) (cf. González-Reimann 2010, 69; *id.* 2002, 64f.).

⁸ Cf. González-Reimann 2002, 71f.: ‘This destruction at *yugānta*, which clearly does not refer to the transition between one individual yuga and the next, seems to allude either to an undefined long period of time, or to the end of the cycle of all four yugas (Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali) taken as a whole. The four yugas taken together are commonly referred to as a yuga, what the Purāṇas would call the mahāyuga, the great yuga, or the caturyuga, the fourfold yuga’.

The chronological position of the *Mahābhārata*, perhaps roughly contemporaneous with the *Yuga Purāṇa* (presumably first century BCE), even though later additions were made to the *Mahābhārata* at least until the prophecy of Mārkandeya (third century CE?), strongly suggests that these comparisons with the end of the Yuga were not mere innocent poetic metaphors. They rather compared events in the *Mahābhārata* with horrors that might arrive to the composers of the text in a not too distant future.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the *Mahābhārata* contains, in the so-called ‘Āpaddharma-section’ of its twelfth book, advice for kings as to how to deal with the difficulties accompanying the end of the Yuga. Yudhiṣṭhīra here asks: ‘When *dharma* and the world are in decline in consequence of the *yuga* coming to an end (*yugakṣayāt*), and when bandits oppress them [*dharma* and *loka*], grandfather, how can one stand firm?’ (Mhbh 12.138.1; translation by Bowles 2007, 264; cf. Fitzgerald 2004, 529 f.). Clearly, the then following advice is meant to be practical advice. This is only possible if the end of the Yuga was considered near enough to justify receiving advice about it. We now know that this is exactly what the author of this passage may have believed.

The approaching end of time may also find expression in the lists of royal dynasties that have been preserved in a number of Purāṇas (Pargiter 1913). These lists end in the early years of the Gupta dynasty (early fourth to mid sixth century CE), and describe in this connection the evils of the end of the Kali age (Pargiter 1913, 56 [*kaliśeṣel*]; translation p. 74; Rocher 1986, 116). However, the continuing rule of this same dynasty may have convinced brahmanical authors that time was not yet coming to an end.⁹

The brahmanical sources we have so far considered create the impression that the Yugas they talk about, or at any rate the last one, the Kali-Yuga, were thought of in manageable historical terms. Indeed, the *Mānava Dharmasāstra* (Manu 1.68–70) gives the four succeeding Yugas a length of respectively 4,000, 3,000, 2,000 and 1,000 (human) years.¹⁰ The Kali-Yuga, according to later Purāṇas, began at the moment of Kṛṣṇa’s death, i.e. soon after the *Mahābhārata* war (González-Reimann 2002, 51; further Thapar 1996, 29; Kane 1973, 896 f.). As we have seen, it was expected to come to an end soon after the invasions by Greeks and Śakas according to the *Yuga Purāṇa*, some centuries later according to other, younger, sources.

⁹ So Kulke 1979, 106: ‘Es war m.E. dieser Widerspruch zwischen dem alten, zyklischen Weltbild sich stets verschlechternder Zeiten und dem “linearen” Verlauf der ruhmreichen Geschichte der frühen Gupta-Kaiser, der zum Abbruch der frühen Königsgenealogien führte’.

¹⁰ To each of these Yugas a preceding and following twilight must be added, so that it all adds up to 12,000 human years, equal to one single Yuga of the gods (Manu 1.71).

3 The end of time reconsidered

Events did not quite follow expectations.¹¹ One reaction, it appears, was to move the end of the Kali-Yuga forward, while yet holding on to the view that this end was near. When the end did still not come, and when presumably the succession of foreign invasions and other catastrophes had come to an end, an altogether different appreciation of the situation gained the upper hand. Rather than thinking that the end of the Kali-Yuga was very near, brahmanical authors now came to think that this Yuga would extend far into the future. This change of perception was based on a number of reflections, among them the following. Time spans were no longer thought of in terms of human years, but rather in terms of divine days, or years, which lasted very much longer than their human equivalents. This made it possible to think of the end of the Kali-Yuga as being far away. The expectation of a speedy transition to a happier Yuga revealed itself in this manner premature.¹²

If this understanding of the early brahmanical texts on Yugas is correct, the notion of the Kali-Yuga, when it was first introduced into Brahmanism, had a very concrete historical sense. It had immediate relevance for the present, because the present was thought of as being the end of the Kali-Yuga, an observation that explained the political and social disasters of the time. It was concrete enough to be testable, to use an anachronistic term, and it turned out to be incorrect: the world did not come to an end during the first centuries of the Common Era. The length of the Kali-Yuga was therefore reconsidered, with the result that henceforth Brahmins lived no longer near the end of the Kali-Yuga, far from

11 Fussman 2012, 26, observes: ‘The first century A.D. was a time of great turmoil and changes in Northern India. Wars raged between the last Indo-Greeks, the Śakas, the Indo-Parthians and the Kushans till Wima Kadphises, c. A.D. 50, was able to bring some peace. There may have been later local revolts or internal strife, of which no evidence remains, and the rule of the Kushans may have been hard, but at least foreign invasions were stopped for more than two centuries’. We must assume that Kuṣāṇa rule did not quite correspond to Brahmanical expectations of the new Kṛta-Yuga.

12 Note that the question of linearity and circularity of time plays no role in the observations here made. Both the ‘short’ and the subsequent ‘long’ Yuga were part of a cyclic vision of time, but the very length of the ‘long’ Yuga made it more linear than the ‘short’ Yuga: ‘Where cyclic time takes a spiral form, it can be seen as almost linear when sufficiently stretched’ (Thapar 2011, 292). Yet ‘historical awareness’ played a far greater role when people believed in the ‘short’ Yuga. Strictly speaking, ‘the Indians did not believe in “cyclic time”, if by that is meant an endless and beginningless recurrence of events. It is true that the narratives recounted in the Purāṇas allude to vast cosmic cycles of repeated creation and dissolution (the *kalpas*), but these are cycles of change *within* linear time’ (Perrett 1999, 314).

it: hundreds of thousands of years were to pass before its end would arrive. Disasters and mishaps could no longer be attributed to the *end* of the Kali-Yuga; instead they were attributed to the Kali-Yuga as such. A short but intense period of catastrophic events that announced the arrival of better times was in this way replaced with a very long period of hundreds of thousands of years characterized by misery and injustice throughout. Texts no longer speak of the *end* of the Kali-Yuga, but of the Kali-Yuga *tout court*.¹³ General conditions, including most notably social conditions, will go from bad to worse, to be sure. But this process of deterioration is nowhere near its end.

4 Traces in Purāṇas

If our reflections so far are correct, a major change took place in the brahmanical conception of history. The earlier conception finds expression in some of the texts considered so far, while the so-called Purāṇas are our main testimony for the updated version. However, the Purāṇas also contain traces of the transition.

Consider the following observations about the presentation of the Yugas in these texts, made by Ludo Rocher in his book *The Purāṇas*:

One feature that sets the *yugas* apart from similar systems in other civilizations is that, in India, the world ages have been assigned specific durations. The four *yugas* extend over periods of 4000, 3000, 2000, and 1000 years. Each of these is preceded by a dawn (*sāṃdhyā*) and followed by a twilight (*sāṃdhyāñśa*) equal to one tenth of the duration of the *yuga* proper. The figures for the *yugas* which appear most often in the purāṇas are, therefore, 4800, 3600, 2400, and 1200, the *caturyuga* being equal to 12,000 years. More often than not these years are said to be divine years. To convert them into human years they have to be multiplied by 360, i.e. $1,728,000 + 1,296,000 + 864,000 + 432,000 = 4,320,000$. (Rocher 1986, 124)

Note the words ‘more often than not’ in ‘More often than not these years are said to be divine years’. Some Purāṇas say no such thing. An example is the *Vāyu Purāṇa* (see especially 32.58–65), presumably one of the earliest surviving texts of this kind (Rocher 1986, 245).¹⁴ This Purāṇa contains a vivid description of the hardships connected with the end of the Kali-Yuga in chapter 58. This description culminates in the introduction of a destructive ruler called Pramiti who kills countless human beings (primarily foreigners [*mleccha*]); following this, people start killing each other, and suffer untold miseries. Then, however, the

¹³ See the example of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, below.

¹⁴ Hazra 1940, 16, proposes 200–75 for the portion on Yugas.

Yuga changes overnight (*ahorātram ... yugam ... parivartate*, 58.101), and a new Kṛta-Yuga comes about (*kṛtam avartata*, 58.102; *pravṛtte ... kṛtayuge*, 58.103). An almost identical account is found in *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* 1.2.31. Nothing prevents us from assuming that these two Purāṇas preserve an understanding of the Yugas that prevailed before their lengths were multiplied by 360, i.e. before their lengths exceeded anything measurable in terms related to ordinary human experience.¹⁵

Vincent Eltschinger has drawn attention to the fact that the apocalyptic passages from the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇas* just considered say nothing about foreign invasions, and all the more about heretical views¹⁶ as harbingers of the end of the Yuga (Eltschinger 2012). It seems fair to explain this in chronological terms. These passages date from a time when Gupta rule had put an end to foreign invasions, and the main threat facing Brahmanism was felt to come from non-brahmanical religious currents including Buddhism and Jainism.¹⁷

An example of a Purāṇa that represents the more recent position, in which the Yugas are thought of as being of exceedingly long duration, is the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.¹⁸ Significantly, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.1, which repeatedly refers to the Kali age, and a few times to the increase or progress of the Kali age (*kaler vṛddhi*), never refers to its *end* (cf. Kirfel 1959, 11f.). This confirms our earlier impression that now the Kali-Yuga as such, and not its end, preoccupied the minds of the authors concerned. The brahmanical worries of the Kali-Yuga in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* concern, as once again pointed out by Eltschinger, heretical competitors rather than foreign invaders.¹⁹

¹⁵ Note that the Yugas are, also in the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, placed in a wider context of Manvantaras and Kalpas, periods of far greater length than the individual Yugas.

¹⁶ The terms ‘heretic’ and ‘heretical’ are far from ideal in this context. For a discussion, see Doniger O’Flaherty 1983.

¹⁷ The suggestion has been made that the story of Pramiti was a reflection of historical rulers ‘such as Candragupta II Vikramāditya (r. 375 – 415) or Yaśodharman of Malvā, who defeated the Hūnas around 530’ (Eltschinger, 2012, 55, with references to further literature).

¹⁸ *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 1.3.11 and 6.1.5 state in so many words that 12,000 *divine* years constitute a *caturyuga*.

¹⁹ Eltschinger points out that the brahmanical Yugas did end up finding their way into certain buddhist texts (Eltschinger 2012). A particularly interesting example is the tenth chapter (*sagāthaka*) of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, which must have been added to the text between its first translation into Chinese in 443 and the second one in 513. Unfortunately the information about Yugas is full of contradictions: there are no Buddhas in the Kali-Yuga (v. 804); Śākyamuni lived in the Kali-Yuga (v. 794); long after Śākyamuni, the Kali-Yuga will begin (v. 784 – 6); Buddhism will disappear at the end of the Kali-Yuga (v. 786). Verse 786 informs us that the Kali-Yuga will come after the Mauryas, the Nandas, the Guptas and then some unspecified foreigners

5 Relevance of historical events

Let me sum up what we have seen so far. Brahmanical identity was, most of the time, not so much connected with a historical narrative in which significant events took place. The main characteristic of brahmanical historical narrative was rather that, when it really came to it, nothing of fundamental importance happened in the present.²⁰ This could take the form that the world had essentially always been as it is today, since beginningless time. Alternatively, it could take the rather pessimistic shape that we live in a time of great depravity that will go on for hundreds of thousands of years to come. Both these views – that of beginningless and endless time, and that of enormously long world periods – were in the end variants of the idea that the world at bottom does not change, or changes so slowly that we cannot notice it; the two do not even exclude each other. Events occurring at present are therefore without deeper significance.²¹ However, we have also seen that there was a time, during the turbulent centuries surrounding the beginning of the Common Era, when at least a number of Brahmins

(*mleccha*), i.e., presumably at the time these verses were added to the text. If that was the *beginning* of the Kali-Yuga, one wonders what would be its end. The text provides no answer.

20 Contrast this with the Christian West: ‘The impact of the Bible on Christian conceptions of history, from the earliest Christian centuries to the nineteenth, was radical and pervasive. It was not only that the sin of Adam, the Incarnation and the Last Judgement framed all history. The fact that biblical history presented the dealings of God with his Chosen People in something like a recurrent pattern of transgression, punishment and deliverance meant that the same pattern could be expected to be repeated so long as history lasted: history presented a recurring series of types and situations within the historical macrocosm of primal sin and final judgement. [...] But above all the Bible offered an archetypal pattern, repeated many times, of covenant with God and entry to the Promised Land, of collective transgression and its punishment by devastation, exile, captivity, followed by deliverance and return, symbolized by the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. It is a pattern, it may be noted, which makes human beings the prime movers of history only through their transgressions: transgression is their role in the historical dynamic, though there is a subsidiary one for the instruments of punishment, whether tyrants or barbarians, and for the individual bringers of deliverance – types of Moses and the Messiah’ (Burrow 2007, 182 f.).

21 Cf. Kane 1973, 923: ‘Since only 5046 years have elapsed (in 1945 A.D.) from the beginning of the Kali age and as Kaliyuga extends to 432000 years according to Paurāṇic computations we are just on the threshold of the Kaliyuga and it is beyond one’s comprehension to visualize what will happen towards the end of the vast period of about 427000 years that are still to pass before Kaliyuga ends. It is very small consolation to read in the Purāṇas in a prophetic strain that at the end of that colossal period Viṣṇu will be incarnated as Kalkin in a villa Śambhala, will destroy all Mlechas, śūdra kings and heretics and will establish dharma, so that the Kṛta age will then be ushered in’.

did attribute deeper significance to the distressful events that were taking place.²² They thought that the end of the Kali-Yuga was near, and that a new Kṛta-Yuga might begin soon.²³ If we agree with Pollock that, for an event to become historical, it must be seen to contribute to the development of a plot (Pollock 1989, 605), we cannot but conclude that the events of that time were historical in the strictest sense. They were interpreted as signs of the approaching end of a world period, more precisely: as playing a role in bringing about the end of the Kali-Yuga. This period, during which current political and social events were seen, not as more of the same but rather as of profound and unique significance, did not last very long.²⁴ Indeed, the urgency of the approaching end appears to have weakened, with the result that less and less attention was paid to the precise events that supposedly announced it. An altogether static vision of history soon came to predominate again.

It has been observed that ‘we can read thousands of pages of Sanskrit on any imaginable subject and not encounter a single passing reference to a historical person, place, or event – or at least to any that, historically speaking, matters’ (Pollock 1989, 606). We have come across an important exception to this observation. The early texts that testify to the then reigning belief that the end of the Kali-Yuga was near refer extensively to historical persons, places and events. The *Yuga Purāṇa*, mentioned earlier, is the best example. We had occasion to mention the incursions by Indo-Greeks and Śakas, related in this text. It also mentions a number of contemporary rulers, whose existence is to at least some extent confirmed by other sources of information.²⁵ These persons and events were mentioned because they played a role in bringing the Kali-Yuga to a close.

Subsequent Sanskrit literature does not normally refer to historical persons and events, even where it complains about the sufferings brought about by the Kali-Yuga. At first sight this is remarkable. Why, for example, are there so few ref-

²² This period coincides rather closely with the one during which the character of classical Brahmanism was formed through the composition of Dharmasūtras, the introduction of the sacrificial cord (*yajñopavīta*) and of the notion of *dvija* ‘twice-born’ to refer to the upper three *varṇas* and especially to Brahmins (cf. Olivelle 2012).

²³ The examples we have considered show that Kane’s remark to the extent that ‘all works that are extant think that they are in the midst of a very sinful age and there is not a single work which thinks that the era of perfection may dawn in the very near future’ (Kane 1973, 886) is not correct.

²⁴ One reason why this period has so often been overlooked in modern scholarship may well be that scholars, struck by what they considered the non-historical attitude of Brahmanism, concluded that India did not and could not have history. Madeleine Biardeau may count as a prime example (cf. Colas 2012).

²⁵ See Mitchiner 2002, 55 f.: ‘The historicity of the account’.

erences to the Hūṇas and other invading armies that brought endless misery in their wake in the middle of the first millennium?²⁶ The answer suggested by our reflections so far is as follows. These other invaders played no crucial role in bringing about the end of a Yuga, as the Indo-Greeks and the Śakas had. The sufferings inflicted by these more recent invaders were perhaps not less severe than the earlier ones, but they were, historically speaking, unremarkable, part of a process that would repeat itself numerous times before the present Kali-Yuga will come to an end. Let me quote John Burrow's observation as to what is a story:

A story is inherently whiggish, and the longer its timescale the more marked this will be, requiring an artificial protagonist enduring beyond the span of individual lives and therefore, generally, of individual purposes. A story is selective, looking forward to its later episodes or its eventual outcome for its criteria of relevance. (Burrow 2007, 474)

Well, the events that these more recent brahmanical authors experienced, unlike those experienced by their predecessors around the beginning of the Common Era, were no longer part of a story, they were no longer relevant to anything in particular. Rather than dwelling upon their specific misfortunes, many brahmanical authors – and most specifically the authors of the Purāṇas – turned their attention to the competitors that were there to stay: various heretics disrespectful of the proper order of society, among them Buddhists and Jainas (cf. González-Reimann 2002, 170; Eltschinger 2012).

It now becomes understandable that brahmanical authors from the time of the Gupta empire onward have a tendency to identify their rulers with (what we would consider) mythical heroes. Hermann Kulke draws attention to the Gupta emperor Samudragupta, who in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvanṣa* repeats many of the heroic feats of the mythical Rāma (Kulke 1979, 106f.). The deeds of King Harṣa, according to Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, correspond to deeds of the mythical Kṛta-Yuga. Sandhyākaranandin wrote his biography of King Rāmapāla of the Pāla-dynasty, the *Rāmacarita*, in such a way that it can also be read as a description of the deeds of the mythical Rāma. The *Pṛthvīrājavijaya* of Jayānaka is a further example, for the poet here systematically identifies King Pṛthvīrāja with

²⁶ It is likely that the unspecified foreigners of *Lankāvatārasūtra* 10.786 (see note 19, above) were Hūṇas. According to Verardi 2011, 156f., 'The destructions brought to India by the Hūṇas, described at length in a number of books of Indian history, are nothing else than the devastations inflicted on Indian adversaries by increasingly confident Brahmins who recruited anyone on whom they could exercise their influence'. This, if true, would give the Brahmins little to complain about.

Rāma (Pollock 1993, 274 f.). The feats of those mythical heroes had been relevant and meaningful, they were part of a coherent story, and in this sense they were historical. The frequent identifications of rulers with gods must no doubt be understood in the same manner (cf. Veluthat 2009, 70 f.).

Brahmanism was a second time confronted with a situation that threatened its very foundations, and it will be interesting to consider how it responded that second time. Roughly from the twelfth century onward, invaders from Central Asia instituted a new social and political order that had no place for the brahmanical order. This time, as Sheldon Pollock has argued, the brahmanical reaction did not invoke an approaching end of the world (Pollock 1993). Quite on the contrary, this new threat came to be interpreted as a repetition, or imitation, of the war between good and evil depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. More than before, ‘good’ kings came to be identified, in inscriptions and literature, with the divine king Rāma, and the invading Turkic peoples were designated ‘demons’ (*rākṣasa*, *asura*).

Pollock’s important observation confirms the main picture drawn in this article. The first series of catastrophic events had been interpreted in the brahmanical tradition as indicative of the approaching end of the world. The second series was interpreted altogether differently: as an imitation of what had happened before. In a way, Brahmanism in the second millennium was no longer in a position to introduce an end-of-the-world scenario, because it had settled for an overall picture of history that would continue for a long time. This was apparently not yet the case at the beginning of the Common Era.

6 Insignificance of contemporary events

We should be careful not to deny brahmanical India a sense of history, as has so often been done. A number of texts, including Sanskrit texts, and numerous inscriptions, show that awareness of what happened in earlier generations was not lacking in India.²⁷ However, our reflections suggest that ordinary historical events were not significant in a deeper sense for brahmanical thinkers, most of the time.²⁸ The exception that proves the rule is the relatively short interval

²⁷ See, e.g., Kulke 1979 and Thapar 2011; further the various contributions in *Religions of South Asia* 5/1–2 (2011), an issue dedicated to ‘Genealogy and history in South Asia’.

²⁸ In this connection it is relevant to recall the difference between history and record-keeping; see Burrow 2007, 1–8 (‘Prologue’) and 231: ‘History as a genre [...] characteristically involves extended narrative, relevant circumstantial detail, and thematic coherence; the recording of

in brahmanical history (barely more than three hundred years) when Brahmins (or at least some of them) believed that the end of the world (i.e. the end of the Kali-Yuga) was near, so that political and social events gained a uniqueness which they did not habitually have.

During most of the time following (and presumably preceding) this relatively short interval, ordinary historical events – including big, perturbing events, such as wars and conquests – were at best more or less close imitations of events that had occurred before, and would occur again in the future. Rulers, it seems, liked to compare their own feats to feats carried out by legendary or mythological figures that lived an indeterminate number of years ago. These ordinary historical events had no deeper significance, they did not contribute to the development of a plot whose importance went beyond the actors directly involved. Events of world-wide significance had taken place in the remote past, and would take place in an equally remote future. They were duly remembered, or anticipated, and are all of the kind we would call mythological or religious. In between these world-shaking events, much happened, but nothing that could compare in significance to those events long past, or hidden in the distant future. Brahmins knew what counted in this world. During the centuries surrounding the beginning of the Common Era they thought that the events they lived through counted on a cosmic scale. They gradually found out that they had been mistaken, and that the events that really matter did not take place right now: they had taken place in a remote past, or would take place in an equally remote future.

7 The increased importance of heretics

Vincent Eltschinger, in an article already referred to, draws attention to a ‘sudden transposition of mutual rivalry to the philosophical level’ that took place in or at the end of the fifth century CE, and that finds expression in new polemical treatises that oppose brahmanical and buddhist thinkers (Eltschinger 2012). Eltschinger is tempted to link this development with the prominence heretical thinkers gain in the Purāṇas from Gupta times onward. Piotr Balcerowicz, too, notices a sudden change in jaina philosophical texts, presumably in the fifth century (Balcerowicz 2008, 57–9). Like their brahmanical and buddhist counterparts, jaina texts become polemical and argumentative at that time. Something seems to have happened in or around the fifth century that had this profound

facts is dictated by thematic, dramatic and explanatory considerations, rather than just chronological juxtaposition and convention’.

effect on philosophical writing. Could the brahmanical transition – from the expectation of an approaching end of the world followed by ‘redemption’ for those who remained pure, to the conviction that present circumstances would continue for countless years – have played a role?

It is difficult to answer this question with confidence. If our reflections so far are correct, millenarian expectations continued until the early Guptas in the fourth century CE, even though they appear to gradually loose much of their fervour, and stop attributing eschatological significance to each and every event. Also under the Guptas, it seems, the extended vision of the Kali-Yuga began to replace those millenarian expectations. An increased hostility toward heretics is already manifest in the last texts associated with the short Kali-Yuga, and therefore with millenarian expectations: (the relevant portions of) the *Vāyu* and *Brahmānda Purāṇas*. The temporal correspondence between abandoned millenarian expectations and anti-heretical polemical activity is therefore not perfect. This does not mean that the two are unconnected. I would rather favour the idea that they *are* connected. It is easier to ignore one’s intellectual (and political) opponents if one is convinced that history itself will soon judge in one’s favour: in the new Kṛta-Yuga there is clearly no place for heretics of various hues. Once this conviction weakens or disappears, on the other hand, one is on one’s own; history will then no longer solve your problems for you. Finding oneself in the wicked Kali-Yuga, and this for a long long time to come, one has to take matters in one’s own hands. This is perhaps what brahmanical philosophers did, for example by writing polemical treatises and engaging in inimical debates.

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Abbreviation

Mhbh = *Mahābhārata*. Crit. ed. by V. S. Sukthankar etc. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona. Poona. 1933–66