Encompassing the Sacrifice:
On the Narrative Construction of the Significant
Past in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*

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The Mahābhārata *has, for millennia, been pivotal to processes of the construction of ideas of the cosmic and social past in South Asia. The text has also been of critical importance in establishing connections between Vedic and post-Vedic cosmic and social self-understandings. The key theoretical issue that underlies both these roles is of the nature of the relationship between narrative and the construction of forms of significant social knowledge in human social groups. The investigation of this relationship presents challenges to received conceptions of culture, history and structure within the academic disciplines of both Anthropology and History. This study explores the complex orientation to the past evident in the Sanskrit* Mahābhārata. *It also addresses the relationship between ideas of the past and issues of self-presentation in the text. I argue that the text constitutes itself as a 'reflective' or 'theoretical' technology in early South Asian religious discourse and that this strategy is intimately related to antecedent Vedic forms of knowledge and practice. I argue that this understanding of the text can shed light on wider processes in the formation and consolidation of Sanskritic knowledge systems in early South Asia. I also suggest that the example of the* Mahābhārata *can help refine more general theoretical orientations to the relationship between narrative, history and culture.*

History, culture, social memory and narrative

'A world is a given ensemble
of possibilities, a given modality'[1]

This paper examines the complex interrelationship of forms of communicative exchange and the construction of the shared past in early South Asia. In particular, I focus upon the role of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* in the construction of ideas of the cosmic and social past and the relation of those ideas to certain Vedic cosmic and social self-understandings. Marshall Sahlins provides a dramatic expression of the rationale for such an investigation:

> The problem now is to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture […]. We thus multiply our conceptions of history by the diversity of structures.[2]

The difficulty with this bold formulation is its operational categories: Sahlins here opposes 'history' to both 'culture' and 'structure' and thus constructs an 'ethno-history' that is fundamentally flawed in its reliance on an abstract notion of an authorial cultural structure.[3] Sahlins provided what was without doubt a programmatic statement when he asserted that 'history is culturally ordered, differently so in different societies'[4] but the formulation is unhelpful if it is allied to a misconception of the epistemological status of the concept of 'culture' as anything other than a scholarly tool. The anthropological experience of 'culture' has, over the last few decades, been 'exploded' quite as successfully as the normative conception of history.[5]

It is unfortunate, then, that the assumption of an authorial 'culture' is prominent in characterisations of the entire field of comparative historiography:[6]

[2] M. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, 72.

[3] This dichotomy is reflected in a wide variety of anthropological research: from Lévi-Strauss' conception of 'hot' and 'cold' societies who either embrace or seek to efface their pasts (see *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 232–3) to Geertz's ritual and non-ritual pasts within Balinese society ('Person, Time and Conduct in Bali,' in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, and A. Appadurai, 'The Past as a Scarce Resource,' *Man* 16, 2 (1981): 202, for further discussion). More recent**,** Africanist, work still relies on the operational category of culture but, in practice, comes very close to an implicit reformulation of the term (see L. Malkki's *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and S. Hutchinson's excellent *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War and the States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) in which she analyses the roles of 'imagined communities' as 'a set of mediated relationships that combine complex symbolic and material concerns,' p. 54).

[4] M. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, vii.

[5] Key publications in this area include Roy Wagner's *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) and James Clifford's *Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). Malinowski himself observed that '[…] human cultural reality is not a consistent logical scheme, but rather a seething mixture of conflicting principles,' in *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench: Trubner & Co. 1926), p. 121.

[6] Despite their being an interpretive counter current to such totalising conceptions which goes back to Malinowski, Firth, Fortes and Leach see Appadurai, 'The Past as a Scarce Resource,' pp. 201–19 for details. For an excellent overview (and invaluable bibliography) of Anthropological perspectives on History, Structure and Ritual see J. Kelly and M. Kaplan, 'History, Structure, Ritual,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 119–50.

There is no human culture without a constitutive element of common memory […]. "History" in this fundamental and anthropologically universal sense is a culture's interpretive recollection of the past serving as a means to orient the present.[7]

The very examination of processes of historical self-fashioning implicitly destabilises, however, the holistic categories that circulate in the work of both Sahlins and Rüsen. In this paper, I will analyse the *Mahābhārata*, not as a reflection of a given cultural 'order' (or as a part of a distinctive South Asian 'historiography'), but rather as a narrative construction of the significant past with a particular social and religious, as well as exegetical, agenda. I will demonstrate how the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* both employs and adapts pre-existing modes of religious thought and practice in the construction of the past and of social and cosmic action. I will examine the *Mahābhārata* as a text which constructs a past 'whose essential purpose is to debate other pasts'[8] and, more than this, other, primarily Vedic, texts and their ideas of social

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[7] J. Rüsen, 'Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparative Historiography,' *History and Theory* 35, 4, Theme Issue: Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective (1996): 5–22. Rüsen exhibits a combination of useful insight (into the multiple domains in which a given conception of the past is active and relevant) with valuable, but ultimately frustrating, generalisation (as in the above quotation). Indeed, if one had to characterise the relevant 'anthropological universal' then it is far better, in my view, to consider as universal the elaboration of both successive, and competing, reflective 'technologies' or 'practices' in human social groups. My research explores the interface between two such 'technologies' in early South Asia, Veda and *Mahābhārata*. Rüsen usefully argues that a certain mode of historical consciousness, namely the 'western' mode, has an 'unreflected meta-status' in comparative analyses. One must, however, be wary of generalisation even in this regard. Linda Orr explores the genre typologies and literary conventions of 'Western' history writing at some length in her 'The Revenge of Literature: A History of History' (*New Literary History* 18 (1986–87): 1–47). A more subtle approach than Rüsen's is adopted by Christian Meier in his 'Die Entstehung der Historie,' in *Geschichte: Ereignis und* Erzählung, Poetik und Hermeneutik V, ed. R. Koselleck and W. Stempel (Munich, 1975), p. 256: 'Es scheint an der Zeit, eine in größerem Stil vergleichende Betrachtung der verschiedenen Formen anzustellen, in denen in den versciedenen Kulturen und Gesellschaften historische Fragen, Betrachtungsweisen, Interessen mit den Problemen, Perspectiven und Bedürfnissen, mit bestimmten Weisen des Handelns, der Veränderung, der Erwartungen und mit bestimmten Struktueigentümlichkeiten der gesellschaft korrelieren' [It seems to me time to install an elaborated comparative view of the different forms, within which the different cultures and societies correlate historical questions, world-views, and interests with certain ways of activity, of change, of expectation, and with certain structural peculiarities of society].

[8] A. Appadurai, 'The Past as a Scarce Resource,' 202. Appadurai describes this past as a 'third kind of past' building on Geertz's conception of a ritual and a non-ritual past. I would argue that this third kind of past theoretically destabilises the other two. Tambiah's work is instructive here, he comments of Thai and Buddhist history that it is 'difficult or even impossible […] to separate continuities from transformations. He also suggests that 'deep seated dialectical tensions can be 'continuities' (see *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 528 and 517). We will take up this point below in relation to the overly polarised approach taken by Heesterman in his construction of contrasting 'Sacrificial' and 'Ritual' orders in the Vedic corpus (see his *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

and cosmic process. Indeed, my arguments will take the 'codification of historical memory'[9] as an activity which is always embroiled in a great variety of wider social, philosophical and theological issues. This orientation to history, and its relation to forms of narrative discourse, requires, however, further theoretical elucidation.

If Anthropology has been overly dominated by the concept of the cultural 'whole,' then historical studies have been dominated by an idea of objective historical significance based on simplistic models of cause and effect. The limitations of these models have been known for some time. Ilse Bulhof comments of Dilthey:

> [He] […] added to this theory of objective historical significance the notion that an event had first to be subjectively experienced as significant by the community before it could have an objective effect on later history.[10]

Dilthey's insight is worthy of more detailed theoretical development than it has currently received.[11] He suggests here that an event must be constituted as significant before it may have an effect. It follows from this that in order for an event to be experienced or constituted as significant, it must do so in a particular medium, that is to say, it must enter the multi-media domain of 'social memory.'[12] If this is the case, then our key task is to refine our orientations to the media in which ideas of the past take shape. A second task that is of critical importance is the analysis of social memory in relation to other forms of contextually related activity. This paper addresses the first of these tasks by approaching the *Mahābhārata* in the theoretical context of the exploration of the roles and functions of narrative activity in human social groups. It addresses the second task by means of an exploration of the inter-textual relations between the *Mahābhārata* and the Vedic corpus.

This strategy of analysis allows us to address the important question 'how do social groups constitute events as significant and in relationship to what presuppositions and what other forms of discourse or practice?' In this paper, I will limit my analyses to the particular role of Sanskrit narrative discourse in the answering of the above question in an early South Asian context. I will argue, specifically, that

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[9] J. Assman, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. R. Livingstone, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, 19.

[10] I. Bulhof, 'Structure and change in Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophy of history,' *History and Theory* 15, 1 (1976): 27. See also W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 7, Stuttgart and Göttingen, 1961, 80.

[11] Sheldon Pollock remarked, still somewhat equivocally: 'The proper and critical task of history […] may be not what 'really happened' but how people come to believe what happened,' see 'Rāmāyaṇa and political imagination in India,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, 2 (1993): 264.

[12] By the designation 'social memory' I refer to what Richard Werbner has called 'memory as public practice,' by which he refers to any form of shared discourse about the past that is considered to be of fundamental importance to the state of both the present and the future in a given social context. Richard Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony*, Introduction: Beyond Oblivion: Confronting Memory Crisis, London: Zed Books, 1998, 1.

the *Mahābhārata*'s construction of the significant past is a form of narrative commentary on antecedent forms of early South Asian religious discourse.[13]

This contention is based upon a very specific understanding of narrative activity as a critical means for both the transmission and adaptation of ideas in human social groups.[14] R.B. Nair, in her *Narrative Gravity,* suggests that 'narrative […] is a structure that introduces the question 'why?' and the connective 'because' into the world.'[15] Nair's compellingly clear characterisation of narrative activity suggests that, as a mode of expression, narrative is not optionally commentarial but rather constitutively so. I will build on Nair's characterisation of narrative discourse and argue that narrative is capable of functioning as a form of 'theory.' By this, I mean that it *presents, implicitly or explicitly, particular hypotheses about phenomena that are either in the world or within its own discourse and further presents a paradigm to explain, or encourage further interpretation of, these phenomena.*[16] In this paper, I will argue for an understanding of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* as an application of narrative theory in early South Asian religious discourse. The particular context in which I wish to explore these theoretical capacities is that of the construction and adaptation of the cosmic and social past. This analysis, of the narrative construction of the past, can then take its place as part of a wider engagement with strategies and conflicts in 'the management of meanings,' and the role of Sanskrit knowledge systems, in early South Asia. Arjun Appadurai suggests, I think rightly, that this form of approach should 'precede analysis of those substantive and intrinsic values over which the competition is apparently taking place.'[17]

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[13] 'Early South Asian Religious Discourse' should minimally be taken to refer to the range of relevant edited and unedited Sanskrit, Pāli, Prākritic and proto-Vernacular sources to which we have access in the major research libraries and which are tentatively dated within the period that extends from the first millennium B.C.E. to the first millennium C.E., it should maximally be taken to refer to the abstract notion of the total range of data for that period. This includes epigraphic, numismatic and material culture sources. I am not, of course, claiming acquaintance with either the whole of the former or even the competence to address the latter, but am rather arguing for the capacity for the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, as a consequence of the potentialities of its narrative structure and thematic and exegetical interrelationships, to address and comment upon materials within this notional totality. This paper is specifically concerned with the *Mahābhārata*'s relation to the Vedic corpus.

[14] The realisation of the salience of narrative studies for human social and cognitive development and the reciprocal application of cognitivist approaches in the Humanities has resulted in a flurry of recent publications. From the work of specialists in English such as R.B. Nair's *Narrative Gravity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Mark Turner's *The Literary Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), to the work of Evolutionary Anthropologists such as M. Tomasello's *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[15] R.B. Nair, *Narrative Gravity*, 344.

[16] This is an extension of Nair's definition of the function of stories 'they present particular hypotheses about phenomena in the world and present a paradigm to explain them,' see *Narrative Gravity*, 343.

[17] A. Appadurai, 'The Past as a Scarce Resource,' 203 (paraphrasing the work of Cohen and Comaroff).

This paper, then, pays close attention to the manner and means of the narrative construction of the past in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* in relation to wider forms of thought and action in early South Asia. In this way, the fundamental insight of Durkheim and Mauss[18] into the historicity of classificatory forms, of rationalities as social institutions, can be fruitfully combined with an awareness of the impact of ongoing reflexive evaluation of those institutions and rationalities by interested (and, more often than not, politicised) parties. The objects of our analysis are, then, 'economies' of discursive practice 'with intrinsic technologies, necessities of operation, tactics they employ, and effects they transmit.'[19] The formulation of Coomaraswamy with which this paper began can then be subjected to an exegetical strategy, familiar to Vedāntists, in which the term 'modality' 'empirically eviscerates' reified conceptions of 'world' and, by extension, 'culture.'[20] In this way, my analyses will contribute to the ongoing refinement of scholarly orientations to the construction and adaptation of notions of the shared past in human social groups.

Exegetical encompassment and the significant past in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*

This paper will not rehearse the recidivist assumption of a South Asia without meaningful historical self-awareness.[21] Sheldon Pollock's comment is instructive in this regard:

> The 'history' that forms the yardstick of India's inadequacy, then, may not be an altogether useful measure, no better than the stories that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries dreamed

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[18] See E. Durkheim and M. Mauss, 'De Quelques Formes Primitives de Classification,' *Année Sociologique* 6 (1903): 1–72. For a thorough and insightful study of this text, which significantly problematises the critique of Durkheim and Mauss' work by Joseph Needham (in his translation of the above work: *Primitive Classification*, London, 1963) see N. Allen, *Categories and Classifications: Maussian Reflections on the Social* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000). In particular, Allen suggests that the ongoing reflexive adjustment of ideas of natural and social order in social groups is anticipated by Durkheim and Mauss: 'When introducing the notion of segmentation, they propose that once a classification of nature has come into being, it can act back on (ragir sur) its cause […] and contribute to modifying it' (p. 52). This is of fundamental importance for our orientation to the *Mahābhārata* in early South Asia.

[19] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, 68–9.

[20] I refer here to Śaṃkara's analysis of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. See J. Lipner, 'Śaṃkara on *satyaṃ jñanaṃ anantaṃ brahma*,' in *Relativism, Suffering and Beyond*, ed. P. Bilimoria and J.N. Mohanty, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 301–18.

[21] Indifference to the past is, in any case, belied in the *Mahābhārata* by an index of fame which is precisely a measure of the extent to which a given being and their actions have been subject to a process of 'narrativisation.' For example, in the Āraṇyakaparvan of the *Mahābhārata*, in the context of the narrations of Mārkaṇḍeya, we find the narrative of Indradyumna, a royal sage who falls from heaven and whose return is predicated on the discovery of a being who remembers him. After visiting a trail of progressively more ancient beings it is the tortoise Akūpāra who finally recognises him. See *Mbh* 3.191.

to be history. Upon reflection we find ourselves, as we so often and no doubt inevitably have done, looking vainly in ancient India for a category constructed in modern Europe, and a self-deluding category at that.[22]

Instead, having addressed some of my core theoretical concerns, I will suggest that the construction of the significant past in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is marked by a sustained, deliberate, and creative engagement with Vedic religious and social self-understandings. In this way, I intend to show how 'the destiny of the Veda' is not just 'a process of abstraction'[23] but also a process of concretisation. This is achieved, in the *Mahābhārata*, by means of narratives which historically contextualise Vedic sacrificial activity as part of a deliberate exegetical agenda. The goal of this agenda is to assume both the creative capacities and the exalted status of the Vedas.[24] In this

[22] S. Pollock, 'Mīmāṃsā and the Problem of History in Traditional India,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, 4 (1989): 605. This is not to discount Pollock's valuable analysis of the impact of Mīmāṃsic discourse on modes of approach to the past in early South Asia. I think this impact has, however, been overstated in this and other works such as that of R.W. Perret in his 'History, Time and Knowledge in Ancient India,' *History and Theory* 38, 3 (1999): 307–21. The difficulty with the latter paper is that it radically underestimates the significance of arthavādic, itihāsic discourse, and universalises trends in philosophic exegesis as an explanation for 'ancient Indian ahistoricity.' There is also a tendency in this paper to underestimate the instrumentalism of classical South Asian epistemologies, which itself reflects the instrumentality of their Vedic antecedents. That is to say, the validity of a given form of knowledge tends, in early South Asia, to depend on the goal of its application. Pollock's work is considerably more subtle in this regard, but the notion that 'thinking about things historically, as constellations of contingencies […] became impossible' in early South Asia cannot be accurate in relation to a literary corpus that includes the *Mahābhārata* as one of its most prominent works. Pollock's emphasis on philosophical exegesis leads to an underestimation of the significance and content of alternate, and in this case narrative, modes of hermeneutic engagement with the Vedic corpus.

[23] L. Patton, *Myth as Argument: The Bṛhaddevatā as Canonical Commentary*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996, 444.

[24] The work to which I did not have access until the completion of this paper was Laurie Patton's *Bringing the Gods to Mind.* This work exhibits a wide range of parallels with my own orientation to the transformation and transcreation of Vedic knowledge in subsequent South Asian religious discourse. The work focuses, in particular, on the development of mantric 'thinking,' her central aim, of an examination of the 'wider context of metonymical thinking and the expansion of the Vedic associative imagination' could equally well stand as a summary of my analytic goals in relation to the *Mahābhārata*. See *Bringing the Gods to Mind: Mantra and Ritual in Early Indian Sacrifice*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 30. The text as a whole seems to see the polysemy of the Vedic *mantras* as the enduring feature, and key practical and cognitive resource, of the Vedic knowledge system. This polysemy acts, for Patton, as a reservoir for metnonymic extension. I see, rather, that it is the cross application of core competencies and the fulfilment of core functions that is the enduring feature of Vedic and para-Vedic religious discourse. In this view 'internalization' and 'externalization' of the Vedic ritual system (be this in the context of *Upaniṣadic* speculation or Dharmaśāstric codification) are simply different exegetical manoeuvres on a single hermeneutic continuum (for classic expressions of the 'interiorization of the sacrifice' hypothesis in early South Asian religious discourse see Chapter Two 'Renoncement et intériorisation du sacrifice,' in M. Biardeau and C. Malamoud, *Le Sacrifice dans L'Inde Ancienne* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1976), p. 57–80, and Chapter Two 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer' of Heesterman's *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Chicago: University of

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way, the *Mahābhārata* restlessly pursues its own strategies of exegetical encompassment and creative self-aggrandizement. Laurie Patton elegantly summarises the matter, in a fashion which resonates with Nair's orientation to narrative discourse, when she states:

> There is value in taking a new approach which examines the uses of a particular mythical narrative to argue a point, and studies how such arguments have changed, even within the different stages of Vedic and post-Vedic religions themselves.[25]

I will suggest that the *Mahābhārata* seeks to discuss, 'argue' and narrate, a particular view of the cosmos and the significant past into being. I will further suggest that, in so doing, the text is self-consciously positioned as the medium *par excellence* for such an undertaking in a way that resonates very strongly with the creative capacities of the Vedic ritual order.

I will suggest, in particular, that the *Mahābhārata* engages in a ritually derived construction of time and text. This will allow me to demonstrate how the *Mahābhārata* functions as an application of 'narrative theory' in early South Asian religious discourse. Indeed, I will show how the foundations of time and text are deliberately interrelated, and sometimes conflated, within the *Mahābhārata*. I will also suggest that the narrative structure of the *Mahābhārata* itself provides a model for

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Chicago Press, 1985), p. 26–44). Patton's conclusion, however, concerning 'intertextual metonymy' in which 'Vedic texts show different uses of resemblance for different exegetical purposes […] one text can refer to another, build on another, and yet use the same imagery for very different ends…the intellectual operations of these kinds of texts thus become of interest in their own right […] making resemblances also involves making claims about the nature, function, and privilege of canonical texts and their authors' is as brilliant as it is programmatic, and my current paper stands as a small contribution to such an undertaking in a post-Vedic context (see *Bringing Ritual to Mind*, 193–4).

[25] L. Patton, *Myth as Argument*, xx. The concept of myth, however, tends to stand as a holistic complement to the concept of culture with all the same 'buried' issues of compositional agency that I indicated in my introduction. The term 'epic' is also somewhat problematic. The notion of 'primary epic' has a considerable political history in the west that associates it with the origination of nation states and the heroic activities of kings. This is by no means wholly inappropriate to the *Mahābhārata*, but it involves one in a range of potential theoretical, and indeed even ideological, commitments that are in need of critical examination beyond the scope of the present work. Alf Hiltebeitel has begun such a critical consideration in his *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), see esp. pp. 5–17. One of the more prominent theoretical 'commitments' which the use of the term epic can involve is the adoption of a trans-historical, trans-geographical canon of significant works. This canon links the Aeneid to the *Mahābhārata* and the Shah Namah to the Tain. Such connections remain under-theorised other than within the specific domain of Dumézilian studies of their common Indo-European heritage. It should be noted that Quint's view of epic, following Frederic Jameson, as capable of transmitting '[…] an idea of narrative *itself*—carried through history by the […] genre,' is one that resonates with our own approach to the *Mahābhārata* (See D. Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, 15). In this paper, however, narrative has been selected as the basic unit of analysis. I define narrative as: *A re-iterable, transferable expression of an event, or events, articulated through the establishment of one, or more, organisations of (intra-textual and extra-textual) space and time.*

the narrative exploration of the significant past by readers and hearers of the text. I will commence my analyses, however, with the *Mahābhārata*'s discourse on creation and sovereignty.

A question of origins:
churning the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*

My analyses of the nature and function of the *Mahābhārata*'s construction of the significant past begin, then, at the very beginning; the foundation of ordered cosmic and social life. The *Mahābhārata* contains several such narrations but the text that has undoubtedly taken the firmest hold in South Asian religious life is the story of the churning of the ocean (the *amṛtamanthana*). This is the narrative of the competitive churning of the ocean by the *Devas* (the gods) and the *Asuras* (the anti-gods) to obtain the elixir of immortality, the *amṛta*, and to found a functional cosmic and social order. The tale is narrated in the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, the Ādiparvan. This version of the tale is the earliest extant version in Sanskrit literature of this particular creation-story:

> The earlier tradition never mentioned a cosmos set in order by churning, which first coagulates the waters, then lends fabulous treasures and sets a new world order. The cosmogonic aspect of the *Amṛtamanthana* determined its outstanding impact on post-Vedic culture, which promoted it to the status of pivotal Genesis tradition.[26]

The narrative occurs as a part of a complex network of stories which require some elucidation: The main plot of the *Mahābhārata*, of the conflict over the royal succession between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, which culminates in a horrific war, is only one component of the text. This main plot is narrated by one Vaiśaṃpāyana, a pupil of the text's author Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, to a King Janamejaya, who is a direct descendent of the eventual victors of the main *Mahābhārata* war, the Pāṇḍavas. The main plot of the *Mahābhārata* is narrated during the intervals of a great snake sacrifice (*sarpa sattra*) that king Janamejaya is holding. We come to know of this telling of the *Mahābhārata* by means of it being repeated by a professional storyteller by the name of Ugraśravas: Ugraśravas tells of both the circumstances and details of the Vaiśaṃpāyana narration to a group of *brāhmaṇas*, led by one Śaunaka. These *brāhmaṇas* are themselves engaged in a great Vedic sacrifice (a *sattra*)[27] in the Naimiṣa forest. The text thus has two major 'encompassing' narratives.[28]

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[26] N. Lidova, *Drama and Ritual of Early Hinduism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994, 74.

[27] A *sattra* is an extended Vedic sacrifice that involves twelve or more days of the pressing of *soma,* an intoxicant central to Vedic ritual activity. It is, unusually for a Vedic ritual, one in which the performers of the rite do so for their own benefit rather than that of a sponsor. The *sarpa sattra* is, however, a wholly fictionalised form of Vedic rite to which we find no reference in the Vedic corpus.

As if this were not complicated enough, the *amṛtamanthana* is part of a narrative of a wager between two sisters Kadrū and Vinatā, and this story itself occurs within the narration of the tale of Āstīka, who is a *brāhmaṇa* who interrupts the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya. The story of Āstīka is narrated to Śaunaka by Ugraśravas in response to Śaunaka's request to hear of the circumstances of the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya![29] Śaunaka specifically asks to hear of the churning of the *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality:

> Śaunaka said:
> How and where did the *Devas* churn (*math*) for the *amṛta*?
> Where was that heroic and glorious king of horses born?[30]

A tale of ritual origins is thus narrated within an encompassing narrative of ritual action and in relation to a question concerning the particulars of another ritual. We thus find that, even in contextualising the tale of the churning of the ocean, there is a complex network of narratives, conversations, enquiries and ritual activities. Śaunaka's question allows all of these activities to be focussed on the narrative exploration of the significant past at its most fundamental: the creation of a functional cosmic and social order.

The narrative of the *amṛtamanthana* itself is a simple one and occupies just over two *adhyāyas* (1.16–17). The story details the decision of Nārāyaṇa and Brahmā to aid the *Devas* in the churning of the ocean to obtain *amṛta,* the elixir of immortality. The ocean is churned with the vast Mt. Mandara. The tortoise king Akūpāra provides the foundation for the churning, while the Snake lord Vāsuki provides the cord which is to

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This violent and destructive rite, in which Janamejaya resolves to immolate the entire race of snakes (due to the murder of his father by one of their number), is, however, thoroughly in accord with the Heestermanic understanding of *sacrifice* as fundamentally concerned with oppositional relations of power and issues of the distribution of material goods and of life and death. Indeed, it reflects his characterisation of the original *sattra* as a rite for warriors performed for their own benefit (see *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 151, see, for a more general account, Chapter One 'Sacrifice' in *The Broken World of Sacrifice*). The diachronic dimension of his argument, of the passage from the agonistic *sacrifice* to the autistic *ritual* has however been overstated in Heesterman's work, a point I will take up below (see note 56).

[28] These encompassing narratives achieve, as we shall see, what Richard Bauman has defined as 'the keying of a performance:' '[…] any message, which either explicitly or implicitly […] gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages.' See R. Bauman, *Verbal Art as Communication*, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1977, 18 (quoting G. Bateson).

[29] The proliferation of narrative levels in the *Mahābhārata* can be dizzying: In the Droṇaparva (*Mbh* App. 1.8.1–267) we find, in addition to the two encompassing narratives, four further concurrent narrations, making a grand total of six narrative layers, the most I have observed in the Sanskrit text.

[30] *Mbh* I.15.4:
> śaunaka uvāca:
> kathaṁ tad amṛtaṁ devair mathitaṁ kva ca śaṁsa me
> yatra jajñe mahāvīryaḥ so 'śvarājo mahādyutiḥ

be wrapped around Mt. Mandara in order to facilitate the churning action. The *Devas* and the *Asuras* will pull on each end of the cord. The churning causes the sap (*rasa/ payas*) of various trees and herbs to mix with the waters of the ocean which turns the waters to milk (*payas/ kṣira*). Finally, despite the fact that the *Devas* tire, the relentless churning produces the sun, the moon, the goddess Śrī (sovereignty), the goddess Surā (liquor), the white steed, the celestial gem Kaustubha and the god Dhanvantari who carries a gourd full of *amṛta*. There is a scramble between the *Devas* and *Asuras* for the *amṛta*. Nārāyaṇa intervenes in female form to distract the *Asuras*. The *Devas* drink the *amṛta*. A vast battle between the two classes of divine being ensues. Nara and Nārāyaṇa enter the field on the side of the *Devas*. The *Asuras* are cast down into the bowels of the earth by means of the combination of Nara's divine bow and Nārāyaṇa's awesome discus, *sudarśana*. The *Devas* return Mt. Mandara to its original position and hide the *amṛta*. This marks the conclusion of the *amṛtamanthana*.

The *amṛtamanthana* provides an account of the origins of sacrificial action which also functions as a cosmogony and which is based upon the agonistic opposition of two classes of divine being, the *asuras* and *devas*. There is a consensus opinion in Vedic studies that the *asura-deva* conflict is, in its multiple re-tellings, a fundamentally creative opposition out of which a functional cosmos emerges from the inchoate primal creation.[31] This reflects broader understandings of the creative role of ritual action in the Vedic corpus. Asko Parpola characterises Vedic ritual as:

> [...] The instrument to provide the powerful potencies of the universe with strong resting places: it was necessary to prevent them from wandering about arbitrarily (which would mean infringement of cosmic norms and cause dangerous disorder).[32]

In a more philosophical mode, B.K. Smith suggests:

> The Vedic ritualists attempted to *realise* their epistemological constructs by ritually constructing the universe, heavens, the world, and society; a metaphysics was produced through the ritual activation of an epistemology.[33]

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[31] See: W. Norman Brown, 'The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 85–98; F.B.J. Kuiper 'Cosmogony and Conception: A Query,' *History of Religions* 10 (1970): 91–138. This opposition shifts to a conflict between divine and human beings in the *Śatapatha*, *Aitareya* and *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇas* (See *ŚatBr* 3.5.1.13–23, *AitBr* 6.34 and *JaimBr* 3.187–8). In these texts the competition for ritual ascendancy is between the Ādityas and Aṅgirasas (in the context of the interpretation of the *sādyaskra soma* sacrifice which is an explicitly competitive rite). Heesterman comments: '[...] sacrifice is not just concerned with conflict, it is conflict writ large. The Ādityas and Aṅgirasas fought their battle through sacrifice [...] the ritual itself is replete with references to conflict [...] against this background it becomes understandable that even the harmless and peaceful fortnightly new and full moon vegetal sacrifices are characterised in the older *brāhmaṇa* texts as rivalling sacrifices (*samṛta-yajña*). We also hear of the '*asura*-killing capacity' of the mortar and pestle (used in the *soma* rites) in the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* (4.1.6:8.12) and the *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* (31.4:5.15).' See J. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice*, 40 and 241, n. 152. We will take up this, and other parallel creative oppositions, below.

[32] A. Parpola, 'On the Symbol Concept of the Vedic Ritualists,' in *Religious Symbols and their Functions,* ed. H. Biezais, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1979, 150.

It is clear, then, that the performance of Vedic ritual is by no means a trivial matter. The *amṛtamanthana* is a post-Vedic narrative which brings together a vast amount of this Vedic thinking on the function of ritual action.[34] We will see that the *Mahābhārata*, as the text progresses, repeatedly engages with the notion of sacrificial churning or pressing. This is achieved primarily by locating churning activities in specific contexts in the significant past. The *Mahābhārata* is not, of course, a ritual manual or a ritual commentary; it is, however, among other things, a ritual history. By telling of specific ritual activities in the shared past, the text initiates a complex interpretive discourse on ritual activity that will come to encompass, as we shall see below, cosmogony, kingship and the origin and status of certain forms of empowered text. This discourse culminates in a claim by the *Mahābhārata* to a total encompassment of the Vedic 'constructivist' order. Before I proceed, however, to my analysis of this sequence of narrations concerning churning activities in the *Mahābhārata*, it is essential that certain key features of the Vedic knowledge system are elucidated. In particular, it is important that we gain a sense of the complex interrelationship of ritual and interpretive activity in the Vedic corpus.

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[33] B.K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998, 220. Asko Parpola summarises the matter very succinctly when he states of the Vedic ritual, 'There is no order before it, thus the 'order' is product, failure of the foundation (*pratiṣṭhā*) does not infringe cosmic 'norms' it threatens the ritually maintained and derived cosmic fabric' (Parpola, 'On the Symbol Concept of the Vedic Ritualists,' 150). This is strongly reflected in the *amṛtamanthana* narrative. Staal summarises the matter as follows: The Sacrifice can now be interpreted as one of the modes of human being which constitute being. This ontological interpretation enables us to see how it was (ontically, as Heidegger would say) that such importance was attached to the ritual act [...]. The transformation or consecration which is effectuated through sacrifice, is not a transformation from one being to another but the constitution of being itself. J.F. Staal, *Advaita and Neoplatonism: A Critical Study in Comparative Philosophy,* Madras: University of Madras, 1961, 67. There is a somewhat confusing deployment of the adjectives ontological and epistemological in scholarly analysis of Vedic ritual constructivism (Staal, as in the above for example, expresses himself in terms of being, whilst B.K. Smith uses both terms, but seems to favour analyses in terms of knowledge). This, I think, reflects a fundamental difficulty in applying these western philosophical designations in the context of the Vedic corpus. Indeed, I am not sure that this opposition can hold in the context of a constructivist account of the cosmos, that is to say it is knowledge of how to perform the ritual, and knowledge of the significances of the ritual (which is precisely an analogical competence, a competence in the comprehension of inter-referential features) that allows the ritual to have its ongoing constructive and integrative ontological impact. When Pollock says that 'theory precedes practice' in South Asia (in his 'The Problem of History') I would say, more specifically that epistemology, to an extent, precedes ontology in the Vedic ritual and conceptual order (although this would be better expressed as knowledge/ desire precedes differentiated being in the Vedic ritual and conceptual order, with desire as minimally involving the knowledge of the desire for differentiation which itself must be regulated/ corrected by ritual activity—such a formulation is, to my mind, more accurate and does not presuppose the radical separation of these two fields of philosophical interest, epistemology and ontology).

[34] In this sense the text functions as a *mīmāṃsā*, an exegesis of Vedic text. This is in the pre-Upaniṣadic sense of the term discussed by both Patton and Kane. See L. Patton, *Myth as Argument*, 14, and P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968–75, 5: 2, 1154.

B.K. Smith characterises the Vedic intellectual programme as one that centres on a particular sequence of interpretive relations:

> Vedic philosophy results in a system of mutual resemblance between three hierarchically calibrated registers: 1) the scale of ritual performance […], 2) the relative quality and realisation of the sacrificer's earthly self and status […] and 3) the hierarchical order of selves and worlds of the unseen spheres.[35]

Awareness of these relations is dependent on a further Vedic concept, that of the *bandhu* or connection:

> The term *bandhu* […] has in the course of time been translated in various ways […] the Petrograd dictionary, followed by Monier-Williams, translates it by (1) 'connection, relation, association, respect, reference; (2) relative, kindred, cognate kinsmen […].'[36]

Gonda argues in his '*Bandhu* in the *Brāhmaṇas*' that the concept of the *bandhu* encompasses both the knowledge of interconnection and the impact or power of that knowledge:

> Hence also the belief that there may exist a close relationship or correspondence between phenomenal reality or a province of the whole universe or a section made from it, for instance the sacrificial place, a *maṇḍala,* a sacred place or building. All these are centres of power.[37]

Ritual, in the Vedic conceptual order, is, as we have seen, the primary means of ordering the universe which naturally tends toward dysfunction.[38] The efficacy of the ritual act is dependent on an interpretive competency typified by an understanding of the *bandhu,* or connection, between different spheres of activity.[39] The success of the ritual act is thus dependent on both the practical and cognitive competency of its participants. This is reflected in accounts of the origin of the Vedic ritual system: Prajāpati in his distress at his dysfunctional creation 'sees' a ritual soluton:

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[35] B.K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance*, 119.

[36] J. Gonda, '*Bandhu* in the *Brāhmaṇas*,' *Adyar Library Bulletin* 29 (1965): 1.

[37] J. Gonda, '*Bandu*,' 5.

[38] Dysfunction by either extremes of under-differentiation (*jāmi*) and self-consumption—as in *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 1.117 where the creation is made up of undifferentiated cannibals consuming one another—or radical over-distinction (*pṛthak*)—as in *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 21.2.1 where Prajāpati's creations scatter in fear of being consumed by their creator.

[39] *Bandhu* equations were often conceptualised as functioning on a number of levels: *adhidevatam,* with regard to the deities, *adhyātmam,* with regard to the self, *adhiyajñam*, with regard to the sacrifice (e.g. in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10.2.6.16/17/18 respectively), and also *adhibhūta,* pertaining to the natural order. The earliest identifications are found in the *yajus* formulae. For details see Parpola, 'On the Symbol Concept of the Vedic Ritualists,' 140ff. H. Oldenberg, *Vorwissenschaftliche Wissenschaft*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1919, 110ff. S. Schayer, 'Die Struktur der magischen Weltanschauung nach dem Atharva Veda und den *Brāhmaṇa*-Texten,' *Zeitschrift für Buddhismus* 6 (1925): 267ff. J. Gonda, *Vedic Literature*, History of Indian Literature 1, 1, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1975, 372ff.

He saw (i.e., discovered) the forty nine day sacrificial session. Thereupon this (creation) became separated (*vyāvartata*). Cows became cows, horses (became) horses, men (became) men, and wild animals (became) wild animals.[40]

Prajāpati is also himself made whole by the sacrifice, having fallen into pieces at the strain of the sacrificial act.[41] In this way, 'Prajāpati and the sacrifice bring each other into existence.'[42] Thus, in the Brāhmaṇa accounts of Prajāpati's activities, the ritual agent is re-created as he creates. Put in another way, the macrocosmic establishment of order in the created world is reflected in a microcosmic re-establishment of the practitioner of the sacrifice as he engages in ritual activity. In this way, a close identification, or *bandhu*, is established between ritual agent and ritual output (the functional cosmos). This connection finds further expression in a deliberate blurring of the distinction between the cosmos and Prajāpati himself. Prajāpati is associated with the year and the whole, the all (*sarva*), of both space and time.[43] I will examine, below, how this close identification between the ritual agent and the cosmos was to become constitutive of both early South Asian conceptions of sovereignty[44] and certain forms of related religious discourse.

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[40] *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 24.11.2 (trans. Smith, *Reflections*, 63).

[41] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.1.2.11, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.4.2.11 and 13.

[42] B.K. Smith, *Reflections*, 68.

[43] *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.6.3.35 and *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.393: *prajāpatir eva saṃvatsaraḥ* 'the year (is) Prajāpati.' This is of course itself an example of a *bandhu* equation. The year is also described as the *pratimā*, copy or image, of Prājāpati in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (11.1.6.13). Such a description provides a conceptual foundation for symbolic manipulation that could very easily escape the ritual commentary into other forms of symbolic activity. For a detailed discussion of this passage see Parpola, 'On the Symbol Concept of the Vedic Ritualists,' 142. In the same article, Parpola emphasises the relation between the technical meaning of *bandhu* and its workaday meaning of 'kin or relation;' he suggests, developing Gonda's perspective (in his 'Bandhu in the *Brāhmaṇas*'), that this term indicates a connection that surpasses even the sense of genealogical relation and incorporates an 'intense consciousness of unity' (151). See also *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.2.2.3. As early as the *Ṛg Veda,* we find evidence of the centrality of forms of interpretive competence in early South Asian religious discourse: In one *sukta,* the sages discover the 'secret connections' in their hearts (*RV* 10.129.4). In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (3.9.19–20) it is 'by means of the heart that one knows the forms (of things),' *hṛdayena hi rūpāṇi jānāti*. This resonates with the celebrated Vedic conflict of Prajāpati and Mṛtyu in *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (2.69–70), in which Prajāpati is victorious, not by force of arms, but rather by means of his interpretive competency (which is expressed in terms of superior counting knowledge). This itself parallels a notion of hyper-numeracy in the *Mahābhārata* which is a necessary pre-requisite for kingship, this competency is described as the *akṣahṛdaya*, the 'heart of the dice' (perhaps with something of a Vedic pun on both 'eye' and 'syllable,' *akṣa* and *akṣara*, see *Mbh* 2.51.03; 3.70.23; 3.78.15), and is very clearly related to the dicing component of the Vedic *rājasūya* rite of royal consecration. We can begin to discern a complex network of connections between the Ṛg Vedic, Brāhmaṇa and *Mahābhārata* material. These texts, taken together, perhaps also provide something of a conceptual foundation for the notion of *sahṛdaya* in later dramaturgical literature, the 'person of heart' who is ideally positioned to receive, and thus activate, dramatic performance, see R.E. Goodwin, *The Playworld of Sanskrit Drama*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998.

[44] Prajāpati's own sovereignty is predicated on his having seen, and then performed, the *agniṣṭoma*—a *soma* sacrifice.

In the actions of Prajāpati, we can discern a basic schema in the Brāhmaṇas that is of considerable significance to our analyses of the *Mahābhārata*. The schema proceeds through creation, the dysfunction of the created forms, the intervention of a stabilising agent, the constitution of a stabilising practice, and the provisional establishment of an ordered cosmos.[45] I will return to this schema repeatedly in the course of my analyses.

Building on this Vedic background, I will argue that the *amṛtamanthana* is part of a broader movement in the text to establish itself as a narrative technology (an alternative 'centre of power' in Gonda's terms) for the ongoing creation and re-creation of a functional cosmos. This strategy necessities the assumption of both the functions of the Vedic ritual and the attendant interpretive competencies typified by the *bandhus* of the Brāhmaṇas. This is the primary sense in which I describe the *Mahābhārata* as attempting to exegetically encompass the Vedas.

In order to discern such processes in the *amṛtamanthana*, I will analyse, first of all, the ritual dimensions of this text. In order to comprehend the rich vein of ritual references in the *amṛtamanthana* narrative we must look initially to the Vedic associations of the term *amṛta*. Geldner[46] argues that the concept of the 'divine' *amṛta*, the elixir of immortality, was related to the 'human' *soma*, the sacrificial plant extract, and the *havis*, the sacrificial butter or ghee. The *soma* sacrifice, as we have seen, is one of the ritual acts that is essential both to the creation and maintenance of cosmic order. Geldner suggests that the capacity for the butter to separate on entry into the sacrificial flame (*amṛtam vipṛkvat*) is an analogue of the separation of the primal ocean. He cites the mention of the sacred horse issuing 'from the ocean, the primal source' in a hymn of the first *maṇḍala* of the *Ṛg Veda*[47] (which resonates with Śaunaka's mention of the 'heroic king of horses' in his request to hear the *amṛtamanthana*). He further argues that this association of ocean, *soma* and creation-by-division is illustrated by the fact that the horse in question is described as 'half divided from *soma*' (*asi somena samayà vipṛktaḥ*).[48] In this way the hymn includes the motif of oceanic birth, *soma*, and the

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[45] In such a brief summary, it is impossible to do justice to the range and depth of the Vedic subject matter. In addition, the position put forward, in the context of an essay analysing the narrative content of the *Mahābhārata* and not the Vedic corpus, emphasises only the basic principles of Vedic thought. The Vedic corpus presents, of course, multiple variant perspectives and, in particular, a deep fascination with paradox and ambivalence which we do not take up in this paper. Heesterman provides an excellent overview of these dimensions of the Vedic corpus in his 'Vedic Sacrifice and Transcendence' which forms the sixth chapter of his *The Inner Conflict of Tradition.* I take up these issues in relation to the *Mahābhārata* in the fifth chapter of my doctoral dissertation 'On the Narrative Construction of the Significant 'Rupture' in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (to ordered ritual and social activity). See my *A Fire of Tongues: Narrative Patterning in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata*, Doctoral Dissertation submitted to the University of Manchester, 2005.

[46] See paraphrase by N. Lidova in *Drama and Ritual of Early Hinduism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), p. 67.

[47] *RV* 1.163.1.

[48] *RV* 1.163.3. This resonates also with the 'heroic king of horses' in Śaunaka's request to hear of the churning of the ocean. See also MacDonell's inventory of Vedic horses and their associations with

very same verb of division used in the description of the sacrificial separation of the *havi* (*vi* + √*pṛc*).

Natalia Lidova in her *Drama and Ritual of Early Hinduism*[49] takes these arguments a stage further when she adduces a complex parallelism between the Vedic description of *soma* pressing and the *amṛtamanthana*. Lidova argues that the narrative of the churning of the ocean in the *Mahābhārata* actualises, and one might add narrativises, a circle of ideas around *amṛta* in a far more concrete fashion than we find in Geldner's analysis. Lidova examines several key Ṛg Vedic statements and suggests that the association between *amṛta* and the ocean is longstanding:

> There is *amṛta* in the waters,
> There is remedy in the waters,
> Be valiant, ye gods, for their glory.[50]

This association extends to *soma* as well:

> From the ocean rose the honeyed wave,
> Together with the *soma*, it acquired the properties of the *amṛta*.[51]

The *amṛtamanthana* itself details this potent admixture of water and plant extracts, and it is from this milk ocean that the *amṛta* arises:

> The many juices of herbs and the manifold extracts of the trees flowed into the water of the ocean. With the milk of these juices that had the power of the *amṛta*, and with the production of the liquid gold, the gods became immortal (*amara-*). The water of the ocean became milk and from this milk, butter floated up mingled with the fine essences (*rasottamaiḥ*).[52]

The *Mahābhārata* narrative does not itself mention *soma*. Lidova argues, however, that it is clearly alluded to through the Ṛg Vedic *soma/ amṛta* complex of ideas. There is even more compelling evidence within the *Mahābhārata*, however, such as the fact of the location of the telling of the *amṛtamanthana* in the context of two encompassing *soma* rites (the *sattra*s of the two major meta-narrative frames) and in close proximity to the aforementioned tale of Kadrū and Vinatā, which explicitly draws a link between the *amṛta* and *soma* by using the two terms almost interchangeably. This is especially

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both the Sun and Soma, in his *Vedic Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (repr.), 2002 [1898]), pp. 141 and 149ff.

[49] See also her 'Amṛtamanthana: The Vedic Sources of a Hindu Creation Myth,' in *Prakṛti: The Integral Vision*, 5 vols, gen. ed. K. Vatsyayan, vol. 5: Man in Nature, ed. B. Saraswati, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, D.K. Printworld, 1995, 131–9.

[50] *RV* 1.23.19, Lidova's translation, *Ritual and Drama*, 68.

[51] *RV* 4.58.1, Lidova's translation, *Ritual and Drama*, 68.

[52] *Mbh* 1.16.25–7:
> tato nānāvidhās tatra susruvuḥ sāgarāmbhasi
> mahādrumāṇāṁ niryāsā bahavaś cauṣadhīrasāḥ
> teṣām amṛtavīryāṇāṁ rasānāṁ payasaiva ca
> amaratvaṁ surā jagmuḥ kāñcanasya ca niḥsravā
> atha tasya samudrasya taj jātam udakaṁ payaḥ
> rasottamair vimiśraṁ ca tataḥ kṣīrād abhūd ghṛtam

clear in the description within that tale of Garuḍa's seizure of the *amṛta/ soma* from Indra; as Garuḍa moves in to steal the elixir it is the *amṛta* that is guarded by a dreadful iron wheel, but upon the successful completion of his mission Garuḍa refers to his theft of the *soma*.[53] We see, therefore, that there is compelling evidence to link the *Mahābhārata*'s cosmogonic narrative of *amṛta* churning with the *soma* pressing of the Vedic ritual order and consequently the encompassing narratives of the *Mahābhārata* itself.

This can be seen even more clearly, if we accept Lidova's interpretation and translation of one of the actual descriptions of the action of *soma* pressing in the *Ṛg Veda* (which once more employs equine imagery):

> There where the broad-based stone is raised on high to press (the juices) out,
> O Indra, swallow (the juices) squeezed by the mortar.
> There where the woman performs now the pulling now the pushing (of the churn staff).
>
> O Indra, swallow (the juices) squeezed by the mortar.
> There where they tie the churn staff
> As reins to drive (a horse),
> O Indra, swallow (the juices) squeezed by the mortar.[54]

Thus, although there is a vast difference in scale, Lidova argues that the *Mahābhārata* narrative of the churning of the ocean is modelled not just on a cluster of key Vedic concepts but on the minutiae, the realia, of ritual action. It establishes a link between different scales and orders of ritual action, from the actions of the gods to the utensils used in day to day Vedic religious observance.[55] This mirrors the interconnection of varying levels of conflict between opposed classes of beings, be they *asuras* and *devas* or Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. Furthermore, it narrativises a feature of Vedic ritual practice that had not been the subject of narrative elaboration within the Vedic corpus itself. It also conforms to the fundamental emphasis in the *Brāhmaṇas* of the necessity of stabilising agents and stabilising practices. At this stage, these agents and practices are still resolutely divine and ritually based. This, however, will change, as we shall see below.

The *amṛtamanthana* shows, very clearly, how the *Mahābhārata* projects ritual practice into narrative accounts of the significant past, and in so doing transforms ritual into a form of history. Patton's perspective on the *Bṛhaddevatā*'s narrativisation of *mantra* is instructive here:

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[53] *Mbh* 1.29.2 and *Mbh* 1.30.8

[54] *RV* 1.28.1–4, Lidova's translation, *Ritual and Drama*, 69.

[55] In this regard, it is perhaps also relevant 'that the offering ladle (*juhū*) and the companion ladle (*upabhṛt*) are associated with the sacrificer and his enemy.' See Heesterman, *The Broken World*, 49 and 243, n. 16. This of course resonates with the wide variety of oppositional mythologemes in the Vedic corpus, not least of all the *Devas* and *Asuras*.

the function of narrative as commentary is the opposite of the Elidean escape from time. In the *itihāsa* explanations, *mantra* is inserted into the progression of events (one might say inserted into time) in order to provide a credible framework for its efficacy.

In the *Mahābhārata*, it is the *yajña* that is 'inserted in time.' The results are, however, considerably more ambivalent than in the *Bṛhaddevatā*, as the ritual 'framework for efficacy' is subsequently usurped by alternate modes of religious practice. Indeed, the stage is set for the encompassment of *yajña* by *kathā*, that is to say, of ritual by story.

The process of 'narrativisation' is of tremendous significance for a number of reasons; it provides evidence for our hypothesised continuation of the Vedic sacrificial and conceptual order by other, chiefly narrative, means;[56] it allows us to begin to

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[56] And marks, perhaps, a creative extension of the *arthavādas* of the Brāhmaṇas which Malamoud characterises as 'placing the ritual present in relationship to a mythical past' (see C. Malamoud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, trans. David White, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, 29). It is important to remember that these *arthavādas* originated as a form of argument in order to encourage observance of the *vidhis* or *codanās* (the technical details of the sacrifice: the gestures, postures and formulae), these 'arguments' were forms of narrative justification and exaggerated litanies of benefit that resonate strongly with the content of the *Mahābhārata* (in both its content and its declarations of *phalaśruti,* the benefits of hearing the text). Malamoud comments: 'In the end, it is this husk of the *arthavādas* that becomes the flesh and blood of the broader tradition.' It is precisely these *arthavādas* which Heesterman brackets in his characterisation of the 'disconnected' ritual order of the Brāhmaṇas. This is because they contextualise ritual practice in terms of social and personal benefit and the events of the significant past in a way which problematises his construction of a fundamentally asocial ritual order. It is therefore not surprising that Heesterman also tends towards a strong and polarised opposition of *śruti* and *smṛti*, with the former set apart in 'lonely eminence,' rather than a sense of their dynamic interrelationship in the context of a process of ongoing exegetical recovery (as Pollock has it in his 'Tradition as Revelation: *śruti, smṛti,* and the Sanskrit Discourse of Power,' in *Lex et Litterae: Essays on Ancient Indian Law and Literature in Honor of Oscar Botto*, ed. S. Lienhard, and I. Piobvana, Edizioni dell 'Orso, 1997, 395–417. I am grateful to Simon Brodbeck for bringing this article to my attention). For details, see Heesterman, Chapter Six, 'Vedic Sacrifice and Transcendence,' in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 87). I further disagree with Heesterman that the Prajāpati-Mṛtyu narrative of the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* marks the exclusion of death from the *sacrifice* and the founding of a monolithic and autistic *ritual* order (although I am not of course denying that the ritual was heavily 'transcendentalized' in later philosophical exegesis). Heesterman seems to give the mīmāṃsic 'legal fiction' of the ritual order empirical status and dismiss other interpretations as arthavādic and non-authoritative, but they are only non-authoritative within the authority structure set up by the more philosophically minded exegetes! Indeed, it is precisely the Mīmāṃsā who lays the conceptual foundations for the ritual to do so much social dharmic 'work' in later śāstric traditions, despite their evisceration of its referential aspect. In addition, the narrative data seems to, all too often, run counter to their interpretations (not to mention the Vidhāna literature, which consist of entirely of *viniyogas* for use outside the sacrificial situation entirely). I would rather argue that death was absorbed into a victorious agency that takes its place at the connective centre of the ritual act and which must evince the attendant interpretive competencies in order to activate its critical position. The fact of the post-Vedic sedimentation (at least in the ideal-typical discourse of the Dharma-smṛti literature) of *kṣatriya* and *brāhmaṇa* social and ritual roles has been overemphasised in this context. The role of connective centre is open to both king and *brāhmaṇa* (and renouncer) as a consequence of the fluidity of the original conception of these designations (for details of this fluidity see Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 150ff), not as

discern a broader agenda of exegetical encompassment in the *Mahābhārata*; and it sheds light on the particular emphasis on the *somayajña*, in the meta-narrative frames of the *Mahābhārata*.

The *amṛtamanthana* is therefore engaged in diverse forms of 'work' which begin to satisfy my definition of an application of 'narrative theory:' the text presents a hypotheses about the origins of ordered social and cosmic life and further invokes a Vedic paradigm to explain, and encourage further interpretation of, this hypothesis. These activities additionally take their place in wider exegetical processes, and related conceptual developments, in early South Asian religious discourse.

It is of critical importance in this regard, then, that the churning of the ocean narrative provides the basis for an aetiology of not just the cosmos but also of the *Mahābhārata* itself, and furthermore that these two creations are fundamentally interrelated. Here we will move from a series of complex parallelisms between creative ritual action and the narrativisation of ritual action to a concerted attempt at exegetical encompassment in the text: a narrative coup d'etat.[57]

It is in the context of the self-revelation of Nārāyaṇa in the Śāntiparvan that we find a fascinating shifting of churning imagery to textual transmission:

> This narrative, O king, of the hundreds of other *upākhyānas* that you have righteously heard from me, is the essence (*sāra*). In the past, O king, the *amṛta* was churned (*nirmathya*) and extracted by the *Suras* (*Devas*) and *Asuras* and likewise now, here, by the learned (*vipra*) a story-*amṛta* (*kathā-amṛta*) was extracted (*uddhṛta*).[58]

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an isolated pre-classical 'stage,' but rather as an ongoing, if highly contested, feature of early South Asian religious discourse. This is made particularly clear in the culmination of the *rājasūya* royal consecration in the formula 'Thou, O King, art brahman' (See Heesterman, *The Royal Consecration Ritual*, Gravenhage: Mouton and Co., 1957, 141 and 150). This is also reflected in, amongst other things, the wide applications of the term *prāsāda* in post-Vedic discourse to designate both the temple and the royal residence-building on its original Vedic sense of a seat in the ritual enclosure (see Gonda, 'Ancient Indian Kingship (2),' 139, and S. Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986, 136). The conflictual dimensions of the *sacrifice* were centralized rather than excluded from the *ritual*, and in this way, Heesterman's brilliant analysis of the *sacrifice*, drawing on the work of Renou, as 'a manipulation of enigma' (see *The Broken World*, 36), and as a 'manipulation of the organic order of the world' (see *The Broken World*, 31) can then be extended both to the *ritual* and to those second order attempts at manipulation of the ritual enigma we find in the exegetical genres both philosophical, 'epic' and śāstric (as well as in wider forms of religious practice, from architecture to the physical disciplines). The connective centre is, then, the nexus of life and death *encompassed.* This does not necessarily result in a radical separation of ritual from social life. This is especially clear when there is competition for the assumption of this connective centre, as there is in the *Mahābhārata* narratives of the struggles between Yudhiṣṭhira and his arch rivals Jarasandha and Duryodhana.

[57] This parallels similar strategies in the *Bṛhaddevatā* analysed by Patton in her '*Myth as Argument*.' She terms such processes as an 'attempt at totalisation' (see, for example, p. 34).

[58] *Mbh* 12.326.114–5:

matto 'nyāni ca te rājann upākhyānaśatāni vai
yāni śrutāni dharmyāṇi teṣāṁ sāro 'yam uddhṛtaḥ
surāsurair yathā rājan nirmathyāmṛtam uddhṛtam
evam etat purā vipraiḥ kathāmṛtam ihoddhṛtam

From a churning of the ocean to produce a functional cosmos, and an attendant battle between *Devas* and *Asuras*, we come to a churning of text, in the here and now, concerned with a vast battle between two opposed groups of cousins.[59]

One of the fundamental Vedic mythologemes is here reworked into an account of textual transmission. This occurs within a text which, as we have seen, contextualises its main plot in two encompassing *somayajña.* In addition it is, of course, the *somayajña* that forms the ritual basis of the original churning narrative of the *amṛtamanthana.* In this way, we have come full circle; the *Mahābhārata* moves us from the realia of ritual practice to the narrativisation of these practices to the complete transposition of function from ritual to narrative. For who are the pressers of the *kathā-amṛta* if not the participants in the Naimiṣa and Kurukṣetra recitations and by extension the numberless potential participants in future recitations?[60]

We find, in the same passage of the Śāntiparvan, further evidence of this strategic blurring of the creative roles of ritual and text through an emphasis on the creative function of memory, Brahmā and the Vedas. First of all Nārāyaṇa must, at the commencement of each new creation (each *mahākalpa*),[61] remember Brahmā:

> Hundreds and thousands of *mahākalpas* pass together with creations (*sarga*) and dissolutions (*pralaya*), O Indra of kings. At the beginning of each creation (*sargasyādau*) Brahmā the mighty (*pra-bhu*) creation-maker (*prajā-sarga-kara*) is remembered (*smṛta*).[62]

The universe is initiated by a primary act of memory undertaken by a 'stabilising agent,' Nārāyaṇa. This is in accordance with the Brāhmaṇic schema, typified by the roles and activities of Prajāpati, which I outlined above. This empowered concept of

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[59] This link is made particularly explicit in the context of the explanation of how the gods will take birth to lighten the burden of the earth (the fractious *Asuras* have already taken birth and are wreaking havoc). This is the explicit mythic rationale of the *Mahābhārata* war given at *Mbh* 1.58 and summarised at 59.1–6. This is immediately followed by a list of which *Asuras* and *Devas* took birth as which heroes (or anti-heroes) of the action of the main plot. See *Mbh* 1.61. Cutting across this are the divine beings who actually father characters of the main plot, such as is the case in the birth of the five Pāṇḍava brothers Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva from, respectively, Dharma, Vāyu, Indra and the divine twins the Aśvins. See *Mbh* 1.57.96–8.

[60] The recitation of Vedic texts is itself considered a *yajña*, a *brahmayajña*. See A. Hillebrandt, *Ritual-Literatur*, Strassburg: K.J. Trübner, 1897, 75.

[61] The Śāntiparvan is very clearly aware of a cyclical model of macro and micro epochs (as is the Ādiparvan), of what we might call *yugic* theory. This does not stop the *parvan* from making statements which complicate and problematise (and possibly pre-date) this model of a cyclical model of cosmic and historical time. Building on Kuntī's assertion in the Udyogaparvan at *Mbh* 5.130.11–8 that the king makes the age, the Śānti repeatedly takes up this idea that it is the conduct of the king, and not the inevitable procession of cosmic time with its entropic sequence of declining world ages (*yugas*), that constitutes a given age. I see this notion of sovereignty as far closer to the 'Prajāpati model' of the Brāhmaṇas. See *Mbh* 12.70.25–7, 12.92.6–8 and also at 12.139.

[62] *Mbh* 12.326.104–5a:
mahākalpasahasrāṇi mahākalpaśatāni ca
samatītāni rājendra sargāś ca pralayāś ca ha
sargasyādau smṛto brahmā prajāsargakaraḥ prabhuḥ

memorial activity, especially within a complex hierarchy of resemblances, has an inevitable impact on the more restricted arena of the remembrance of the *Mahābhārata* through recitation. Each act of transmission becomes, potentially, a creative act. This becomes especially clear as the narrative continues: Brahmā, in turn, is dependent on the Vedas as a textual blueprint for his creation of a functional cosmos:

> The Vedas are my primary eyes (*parama cakṣu*), the Vedas are my ultimate strength (*parama bala*). The Vedas are my great refuge (*parama dhāma*), the Vedas are my ultimate Brahma (*brahma uttama*) […]. Without the Vedas the world of my creation is in darkness (*andhakāra*). Without the Vedas how should I diligently act (*kuryām*) to create (*sraṣṭum*) the worlds (*loka*)?[63]

Brahmā here expresses himself in terms of a capacity to create, but only in the presence of, and in reference to, the Vedas and he himself must be remembered. Here a further, subordinate, 'stabilising agent,' Brahmā, is introduced as well as a fundamental substrate and guide for 'stabilising practice,' the Vedas. These are, of course, the very texts which enjoin ritual action and which cultivate and pre-suppose the complex conceptual order and attendant interpretive competencies that we discussed above. In addition, we now find that memory and authoritative text are explicitly connected to one another. This, again, resonates with the structure of the *Mahābhārata* as an authoritative text based upon a series of conversationally located, and ritually contextualised, acts of public memory practice. These acts, in and of themselves, narrate the significant past into being and furthermore provide a model for parallel acts of narrative activity. This is, of course, directly parallel to the way in which the Vedic corpus provides both a description of, and speculations concerning, ritual activity as well as exhortations to actually perform the ritual (a performance which is essential to the maintenance of a functional cosmos at all levels of being).

The texts we have translated thus cause us to re-evaluate the commonplace assertion in the *Mahābhārata* that it is a fifth Veda. Such an assertion is cast in a new light by its being placed just after the sequence of speculations and assertions we have been considering. The *Mahābhārata*'s claim to Vedic status must be understood in relation to its understanding, and construction, of that status and as part of a complex strategy of exegetical encompassment. That is to say, a claim to Vedic status here indicates the intention to assume the creative function of these texts as an act of recovery.[64] It is precisely at the culmination of the texts under consideration that the

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[63] 12.335.29–30:
  vedā me paramaṁ cakṣur vedā me paramaṁ balam
  vedā me paramaṁ dhāma vedā me brahma cottamam
  mama vedā hṛtāḥ sarve dānavābhyāṁ balād itaḥ
  andhakārā hi me lokā jātā vedair vinākṛtāḥ
  vedān ṛte hi kiṁ kuryāṁ lokān vai sraṣṭum udyataḥ
[64] This can be compared with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s claim to the same status in its opening aetiology. Both texts posit a new form of activity capable of creatively mediating cosmic and social life. The

Mahābhārata asserts once again that it is *mahābhārata-pañcamān*, the 'fifth' of the Vedas. [65] Our analyses thus provide further evidential support for Pollock's reformulation of the concept of *smṛti*:[66]

> [...] material that, having once been heard in recitation is inferentially recoverable from present reformulations (in language or practice), which once existed as part of a Vedic corpus.[67]

Furthermore, such an empowered notion of text is inevitably at the centre of a competitive struggle for its creative resources. Here the Heestermanic characterisation of the sacrifice as a conflict over 'the goods of life' is liberated from its diachronic, developmental, framework in his work and re-injected into middle and late Vedic as well as immediately post-Vedic early South Asian religious discourse.[68] Indeed, in the *Mahābhārata*, competition emerges as the enduring pre-requisite for access to Vedically derived forms of creative power. The comment of David Carpenter is instructive in this regard, he says of the Vedic corpus, 'What is being canonized here is as much a form of action, and indeed a form of culture, as an authoritative collection of texts.' [69] What is happening in the *Mahābhārata* is a second order, Vedically dependent, 'canonization' of an alternate form of creative action.

These processes can be discerned even more readily in a related series of narrations in the *Mahābhārata* that pertain to text, sacrifice and *kingship*. I will demonstrate, again, the replication of a series of relations at a different level of a vast hierarchy of being in the context of the narration of the significant past. This time the creative role in question is that of the king and it is a prompt in the Śānti for a tour de

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Mahābhārata also posits pilgrimage as a functional replacement for the *śrauta* rites but then, in an exegetical manoeuvre that is fast becoming familiar, posits itself as a functional replacement for pilgrimage at both its beginning and end, *Mbh* 1.2.242 and 18.5.54:

dvaipāyanauṣṭhapuṭaniḥsṛtam aprameyaṁ; puṇyaṁ pavitram atha pāpaharaṁ śivaṁ ca yo bhārataṁ samadhigacchati vācyamānaṁ; kiṁ tasya puṣkarajalair abhiṣecanena

(It once fell from the lips of Dvaipāyana, immeasurable, sanctifying, purifying, and blessing—what need has he of ablutions in the waters of Puṣkara?)

This is a double exegetical encompassment, first the *tīrtha* encompasses the *yajña*, then the *Mahābhārata* encompasses the *tīrtha*. I will take up these, and related, issues in a forthcoming paper on the topic of the *Mahābhārata*'s construction of the significant place.

[65] In *adhyāya* 327.18 of the Śāntiparvan.

[66] Generally characterised as 'tradition,' as 'that which is remembered' and normally opposes to *śruti* 'that which is heard.' Pollock convincingly problematises this distinction suggesting that *smṛti* is not, in fact, subordinate to *śruti*, but rather marks the recovery of forms of Vedic knowledge that may be inferred from the existent materials. S. Pollock, 'Tradition as Revelation.'

[67] S. Pollock, 'Tradition as Revelation,' 408.

[68] See, for example, Chapter Two 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer' in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) and the classic analyses of first two chapters of *The Broken World of Sacrifice*.

[69] D. Carpenter, 'The Mastery of Speech: Canonicity and Control in the Vedas,' in *Authority, Anxiety and Canon: Essays in Vedic Interpretation*, ed. L. Patton, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 30.

force of synecdochic excess that is focussed on the composition of an encyclopaedic treatise.[70]

The critical passage under consideration is the fifty-ninth *adhyāya* of the Śāntiparvan.[71] The text opens with Yudhiṣṭhira asking of the origin of kingship (*rājan*). Bhīṣma responds by first telling of a crisis in the *kṛta* age, the first of the ages of humankind. He states that the Vedas had been lost and with them all cosmic and social order. The gods petition Brahmā who in response composes a compendium of all knowledge in a hundred thousand chapters:

> (Brahmā) then composed with his own intellect (*sva-buddhi*) a hundred thousand *adhyāyas* that explained (*varṇita*) dharma, artha and kāma (duty, profit and pleasure).[72]

It is immediately interesting that Brahmā's response to an existential crisis can be textual. It is also significant that he provides not a copy of the Vedas but a new explanatory and encyclopaedic work which recapitulates them.[73] This is significant because it emphasises the fact that what is important in a time of crisis is not the reproduction of specific contents, but rather the satisfaction of core functions. It also demonstrates the sense of the 'recovery' of Vedic knowledge that is essential to Pollock's view of *smṛti*. Indeed, it is a concise narrative expression, or perhaps better a form of narrative theorisation, of precisely this view of *smṛti*. Brahmā's compendious production is then subject to a complex process of transmission and abridgement. Śiva abridges the text first of all:

> Aware of the yugic decline (*hrās*) of human life-spans (*āyus*) lord Śiva abridged (*saṃcikṣepa*) the śāstra of powerful import made (*kṛtam*) by Brahmā.[74]

There is then a further abridgement of the text by Indra, Bṛhaspati, Kavi and the seven *ṛṣis*.[75] This tale of textual transmission[76] is immediately followed by a history of the

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[70] By encyclopaedic, I refer to the inclusivistic goals of the text. I am deploying the term in an extended sense rather than literally (as a genre designation) and I do not wish to indicate a close correspondence between the enlightenment and post-enlightenment form of the encyclopaedia and the *Mahābhārata*. Despite Hiltebeitel's recent critique of the use of this term (see *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 2001, 161–3) I think Patton's emphasis, following Paulo Cherchi, on 'ency-clopedism' as an 'attempt to organise a comprehensive body of knowledge' is instructive here and has lead me to retain the term (which I came to without prior knowledge of this unfolding debate). For details see *Myth as Argument*, 455ff.

[71] There is also a telling of this tale amongst the appendices of the Bhīṣmaparvan, see App. 7.8.762–820. In this version Pṛthu also performs the Aśvamedha.

[72] *Mbh* 12.59.29:
tato 'dhyāyasahasrāṇāṃ śataṃ cakre svabuddhijam
yatra dharmas tathaivārthaḥ kāmaś caivānuvarṇitaḥ

[73] In much the same way, in the Anugītā, Kṛṣṇa is unable to repeat the *Gītā* to the forgetful Arjuna but can only tell a related *itihāsa* from the past (*purātanam*). See *Mbh* 14.9–15.

[74] *Mbh* 12.59.87:
yugānām āyuṣo hrāsaṃ vijñāya bhagavāñ śivaḥ
saṃcikṣepa tataḥ śāstraṃ mahārthaṃ brahmaṇā kṛtam

origin of human kingship. The two narratives of origins (textual and dynastic) are juxtaposed and interdependent, for the king will ensure the correct application and

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[75] *Mbh* 12.59.89–92.

[76] In the *Ṛg Veda* it is not the pressing of the *amṛta* that is the focus of the conflict but the ritual favours of speech herself, Vāc. She is described as divided in *RV* 1.164.45, in a *sukta* which also provides some interesting parallels to the *Mahābhārata* descriptions of textual transmission: 'Vāc was divided in four parts. These those Brahmans with insight know. Three parts, which are hidden, people do not activate; the fourth part they speak' she is also described as she who 'in highest heaven has a thousand syllables' (*RV* 1.164.41, this might relate to the description of the triple Veda itself as the 'thousandfold progeny of Vāc' at *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 5.5.5.12). This parallels the multiple parts and constituencies of the encyclopaedic texts described above and of the *Mahābhārata* itself. The *sukta* goes on to describe how Agni instructs the gods, and subsequently men, in the universe sustaining sacrifice. This resonates again with the churning of the ocean narrative and that of Pṛthu, in which two orders of being engage in successive acts of cosmic and social stabilisation. The portions of Vāc that are not known further provide a means of establishing a resource for differential levels of knowledge of the true significances of the sacrifice. It is upon this basis that the notion of the person of knowledge is established, the *manīṣin*, the *vipra* or the *kavīyamana* (*RV* 1.164.45/6/18 respectively). It is of course, again the learned, *vipra,* who are to churn the *kathā-amṛta* in the *Mahābhārata*. Here, we might point to a certain degree of competition being introduced not only at the levels of gods and kings (locked in agonistic conflict over access to Vedically derived forms of creative power) but also at the level of the transmitters, or the 'pressers' of raw story stuff (*kathā-amṛta*). In the context of early Vedic discourse, it is the person of knowledge who wins in the sacrificial contest (*RV* 10.71.10) and who 'lauds their position of immortality' (*amŕtasya bhāgám* [...] *abhisváranti, RV* 1.164.21). It is tempting to infer a similar necessity for those who press the *kathā-amṛta* in the *Mahābhārata* passage. This notion is, to an extent born out by those studies which have taken up Vedic sacrificial contexts for narration. See C.Z. Minkowski, 'Janamejaya's Sattra and Ritual Structure,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 (1989): 401–20. R.C. Hazra, 'The *Aśvamedha*, the Common Source of Origin of the *Purāṇa Pañca-lakṣana* and the *Mahābhārata*,' *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 35 (1954): 190–203 and R. Dandekar, 'The Pāriplava (Revolving Cycle of Legends) at the Aśvamedha,' *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 33 (1952): 33, 26–40. There is also a potential relation to the *Mahābhārata* in relation to forms of stabilising religious discourse. In our Ṛg Vedic *sukta*, Vāc is the agent of creative stabilisation: 'After Vāc had fashioned the floods, the oceans flowed forth from her, in consequence of which the four directions exist, and then the *akṣara* flowed forth; on it this entire universe has its existence' (*RV* 164.42: *tásya samudrā́ ádhi ví kṣaranti ténā jā́vanti pradiśáś cátasraḥ, tátaḥ kṣaraty akṣáraṃ tád víśvam úpa jīvati*). K.R. Norman summarises the matter as follows: 'Thus by the sounds she uttered Vāc produced the material of the universe, which was, however, chaotic, unorganised, when it was produced. But, Dīrghatamas avers, she had also produced the *akṣara*, the instrument with which the unorganised material was to be organized. To make use of the *akṣara* and with it perform the first sacrifice, which was that of the creation, the 'heroes' (*vīrāḥ*) took over (*RV* 1.164.43). Who the 'heroes' were and what their origin Dīrghatamas does not state.' (K.R. Norman, 'The Creative Role of the Goddess Vāc in the Ṛg Veda,' 395). Although we cannot shed any light on the identity of these original heroes, the relevance of this material for the brāhmaṇic schema of creation > dysfunction > stabilising agent > stabilising practice and for related conceptions of sovereignty and textual activity in the *Mahābhārata* is clear: the universe is stabilised through the combination of language and ritual practice. In the Vāc narrative we find something of a conceptual foundation for the creative role of subsequent organisations of *akṣara*, and thus subsequent forms of Vedically self-deriving religious expression (the Vāc narrative is itself subject to a series of narrative reworkings, extensions and developments that may be found in the *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 12.5.27.1, *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 20.14.2, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 5.5.5.12, and *Taitirīya Saṃhitā* 6.1.4).

interpretation of Brahmā's great treatise on social and cosmic life. The genealogy of kings is further complicated by accounts of the origin of diverse races such as the *niṣādas* (hill and forest dwellers)*,* and the broad category of the foreigners or *mlecchas* from the body of a particularly dysfunctional king by the name of Vena*.* This resonates with the spectre, in the Brāhmaṇas, of problematic creation. From the very same *adharmic* king comes the *dharmic* King Pṛthu (who issues from the right arm of Vena). Thus a functional king appears from a dysfunctional king. This implicitly parallels the transformation of an abortive originary creative act into a functional cosmos and closely adheres to the Brāhmanic schema of problematic creation > stabilising agent > stabilising practice > establishment of ordered cosmos. This parallel is developed further, as we shall see below. The first words of Pṛthu are revealing:

> I have attained an understanding of *dharma and artha* that is very subtle (*susūkṣma*). Tell me in detail what I shall do with it.[77]

Pṛthu's first utterance is one that asserts the subtlety of his understanding[78] but which immediately follows this assertion with a request for guidance and instruction from the assembled beings. Pṛthu thus exhibits an ideal balance of a sharp intellect with a necessary consciousness of hierarchy. The narrative continues with the birth of Sūta and Magadha (the bard and the panegyrist) and Pṛthu's levelling of the earth.[79] Again, it is worth noting the emphasis on the combination of originary actions based on textual instructions and prototypes and the capacity for such action to be, in turn, re-expressed, re-told, and thus recovered. This is made especially clear in the mention of the birth of the bard and the panegyrist *before* Pṛthu commences the vast act of the creative stabilisation of the earth. Gonda says of the songs of the bards:

> The contents of the panygerics which are considered as historical truth have the effect of a magical performance, causing the exploits described to spread their inherent power and to become active again in the person of the listener.[80]

In addition, the earth itself, *pṛthvī*, in traditional etymologies, is named after Pṛthu, thus we also have a further narrative reinforcement of the identification of king and

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[77] *Mbh* 12.59.107:
  susūkṣmā me samutpannā buddhir dharmārthadarśinī
  anayā kiṁ mayā kāryaṁ tan me tattvena śaṁsata

[78] Heesterman, rather oddly, interprets this as a confession of an 'utterly feeble grasp of dharma.' See *Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 116.

[79] For the birth of the bard and the panegyrist see *Mbh* 12.59.118 For the stabilisation of the earth see 59.19. This is a narrative which also occurs in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (7.4.2.6) and the *Śaṅkhāyana Gṛhya Sūtra* (3.3.2) as well as elsewhere. For further details see S. Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 13.

[80] J. Gonda, 'Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View (2),' 131. The role of the bard and/ or the panygeric is mentioned from the *Ṛg Veda* onwards. See *RV* 5.42.8, 1.25.4, 2.1.16, 7.18.21 and *Atharva Veda* 19.49.6, 1.122.12, it is still a duty of the king to listen to *itihāsas* in the *Artha Śāstra*, see *AŚ* 1.5.11–6.

world which resonates with the identification of Prajāpati and the cosmos in the Brāhmaṇa literature. It is only after Pṛthu has conquered the earth that he is crowned by all beings.[81] That is to say his sovereignty is predicated on his stabilising activities, just as Prajāpati's was. More than this, the king must himself engage in an agonistic conflict before he may achieve sovereignty. This is made even more explicit in a star passage that follows this portion of the tale which refers to Pṛthu's use of the curved end of his bow (*dhanuṣ-koṭi*) to subdue the earth.[82] This resonates both with the *Asura-Deva* conflict and with the action of the main plot, i.e. with Yudhiṣṭhira's bloody victory over the Kauravas. The actions of King Pṛthu also resonate with the ritual action of the *amṛtamanthana* (and all the associations that this text brings with it). This is made fully explicit when Pṛthu milks or presses the earth:

> The earth was milked (*dugdha*) by him for seventeen kinds of crop (*sasya*) as desired by *yakṣas*, *rākṣasa*, and *nagas*.[83]

Thus gods and kings are brought in this narrative into a relation of hierarchical resemblance (dependent on a *bandhu*-like competency) in their common activity of pressing either ocean or earth for the fundaments of ordered cosmic and social life.[84] There is also a concomitant necessity for this to involve some form of armed conflict. The struggle for the means of sacrificial reproduction and regulation of the cosmos is thus one that occurs at the level of both gods and humans. The *Devas* and *Asuras* are in conflict both ritually, in the competitive churning action that constitutes a ritual tug of war, and literally, in terms of their actual battle in the dénouement of the *amṛtamanthana*. Indeed, in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (1.14.5ff) it is the action of making *Soma* the king of the *Devas* that ensures their victory over the *Asuras*.[85] These struggles resonates with the Pṛthu narrative and are also recapitulated in the main plot of the *Mahābhārata* in the competition between the *dharmarāja* ('King *dharma*') Yudhiṣṭhira and his main rivals (Jarasandha and Duryodhana) for the means of consecration of royal status, that is to say the Vedic *Aśvamedha* and *Rājasūya* rites.[86]

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[81] *Mbh* 12.59.120–2.

[82] See *Mbh* 12.132.1–3 after 12.59.119.

[83] *Mbh* 12.59.126:

   teneyaṁ pṛthivī dugdhā sasyāni daśa sapta ca

   yakṣarākṣasanāgaiś cāpīpsitaṁ yasya yasya yat

This narrative is also given in an appendix to the Droṇaparvan, see App. 7.8.781–820. This is an extended account of the narrative in which the earth allows herself to be milked at Pṛthu's behest by the devas, asuras, humans, snakes, the seven sages, the *yakshas, gandharvas, apsaras and the pitris.* This marks the narrative inflation of the narrative to such an extent it seems that the original *deva-asura* churning is subordinated to the agency of Pṛthu, the human king. This might be adduced as an example of a later text's reworking and development of earlier narrative materials.

[84] Indeed, Robert Lingat suggests that the life of the king is sometimes conceptualised as one long *sattra* in his *Les sources du droit dans le système traditional de l'Inde* (Paris, 1967), p. 239.

[85] See also J. Gonda, 'Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View (2),' 133, for a further discussion of this passage.

[86] These narrative interrelationships are very close to what B.K. Smith terms 'vertical' and 'horizontal' connections in the Vedic corpus: the parallel activities of gods and men are an example of

The narrative of king Pṛthu (the name itself also means, 'celebrated,' 'spacious' and even 'prolix')[87] is, however, as we have seen, additionally connected to a tale of the origins of a narrative charter, a narrative blueprint, of just such an ordered social and cosmic life.[88] The custodianship of this compendium, or one very like it (for we are still in the midst of a hierarchical system of resemblances), becomes constitutive in this *adhyāya* of *dharmic* kingship. There is a parallel description of the *Mahābhārata* as subject to a process of successive abridgement:

> (He composed) a collection of six million verses (lit. sixty hundred thousand). Three million dwell in the world of the *Devas,* one and a half million are proclaimed in the world of the *Pitris*, one point four million in the world of *Rākṣasas* and *Yakṣas* and one hundred thousand dwell amongst men.[89]

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a vertical connections in which, 'operates between […] elements […] located on differently and hierarchically ranked cosmological levels' while the relationship between Pṛthu and Yudhiṣṭhira is an example of a 'horizontal' connection which 'link resembling components […] within the same cosmological plane' (B.K. Smith, *Reflections*, 73). This 'connections' are developed into a broader, extra-ritual, hermeneutic of resemblance in the *Mahābhārata*. Thus, for example, in the story of Nala in the *Mahābhārata*, the plight of King Nala resembles that of Yudhiṣṭhira (and fascinatingly both tales are concerned with forms of numerical hyper-competency and kingship which resonates with the conflict of Prajāpati and Mṛtyu in the Brāhmaṇas). For detailed considerations of the interrelationships between the story of Nala and the main plot of the *Mahābhārata*, see my 'An Apprenticeship in Attentiveness: Narrative Patterning in the *Dyūtaparva* and *Nalopākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata*,' *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 54 (2002): 33–62) These narrative strategies, of implicit comparison-as-exegesis, also resonate with Patton's description of the definitional strategies of Yāska: '(his) basic method of etymologizing obscure Vedic words is by finding another word that is both similar in sound, and which *describes* the deity or character's *bhāva*, or essential activity' (*Myth as Argument*, 128, my italics). This might be seen as a micro-textual, lexical, application of the same exegetical principle, that is to say, a hermeneutic of resemblance.

[87] For a further discussion of kingship and the earth, see J. Gonda, 'Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View (3),' *Numen* 4 (1957): 54ff.

[88] In a personal communication, Simon Brodbeck points to the parallel variations in the multiple agencies who originate both encyclopaedic treatises and the institution of kingship and the attendant rod of punishment (and guarantor of *dharma*), the *daṇḍa*: at 12.59 Viṣṇu inaugurates kingship, at 12.67 Brahmā does, the institution of *daṇḍa* occurs at 12.122 and 12.160, with Brahmā and Śiva in the respective creative roles. This underscores both the necessity of a stabilising agency and an accompanying textual charter at multiple cosmic levels and the complex agenda of 'dharmacisation' in early South Asian religious discourse. See P. Olivelle, 'The Semantic History of Dharma in the Middle and Late Vedic Periods' and P. Horsch, 'From Creation Myth to World Law: the Early History of Dharma,' *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 491–511 and 423–48. See also see footnote 91 below.

[89] Star Passage at *Mbh* 1.1.63, *1.29.2–4:

> ṣaṣṭiṁ śatasahasrāṇi cakārānyāṁ sa saṁhitām
> trimśacchatasahasraṁ ca devaloke pratiṣṭhitam
> pitrye pañcadaśa proktaṁ rakṣoyakṣe caturdaśa
> ekaṁ śatasahasraṁ tu mānuṣeṣu pratiṣṭhitam

There is also an encyclopaedic treatise of the seven sages that functions as yet another parallel to this. This is mentioned at 12.322.26–30 as *the śāstram uttamam*. There is also mention of similar encyclopaedic texts for kings (12.64—obtained by heroic kings from Viṣṇu; thanks to Simon Brodbeck for giving me this reference). It seems that the *Mahābhārata* most certainly wishes to foreground the composition of encyclopaedic texts!

Thus there is a compelling reason to read these encyclopaedic texts in terms of the *Mahābhārata* and *vice versa*. Indeed, Vyāsa describes the extent of the *Mahābhārata* as covering all sciences, the Vedas, and the accounts of the past (*itihāsa* and *purāṇa*).[90] This seems to further emphasise the parallel with Brahmā's great work.

The relation in the Brāhmaṇas and in the *amṛtamanthana* was between ritual and cosmos. In the story of King Pṛthu, and the account of the creative activities of Brahmā, such a relation obtains, but this is additionally mediated by a complex vision of the role of memorial and textual activity in the creation and maintenance of ordered social life. These activities centre on compositions that recover forms of Vedic knowledge. In addition, the importance of *dharma* is fore-grounded in the narratives of the establishment of earthly sovereignty much more prominently than it is in the narratives of divine activity. It is significant that these narratives of earthly sovereignty take shape in the later Brāhmaṇas (such as the *Śatapatha*), the Gṛhya Sūtras (such as the *Śaṅkhāyana*) and the *Mahābhārata*. These texts index, or perhaps better provide a narrative theory of, the cross application of forms of Vedic knowledge to the social realm that is such a marked feature of post-Vedic religious developments.[91] This is the under-examined complement to the much explored 'internalisation' of ritual understandings in Brāhmaṇical and Śramaṇic tradition. Pollock, once more, summarises the matter succinctly in the context of the concept of *dharma*:

> The elaboration of the concept *dharma* beyond its primary field of reference—Vedic ritualism, or <sacrifice, recitation, and gifts>, as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* defines the three components of *dharma* (2.23.1)—was a development of crucial (if as yet apparently underappreciated) significance in Sanskrit socio-cultural history. Far from accepting the paradox as Heesterman formulates it—that the Vedas have really nothing to do with *dharma*, and so have <ultimate authority over a world to which they are in no way related >—we should rather, in keeping with actual historical sequence, reverse (and so cancel) it: the <world> outside of ritualism had originally little to do with *dharma* [...] *dharma* ultimately

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[90] For a full description see App. 1.1.13–40.

[91] The post-Vedic elaboration of the *dharma* concept (loosely translated as duty, law or meritorious action) is the ultimate expression of constructivist Vedic logic liberated from the confines of the sacrificial arena. Conformity to *dharma* (which operated on a vast number of hierarchically ordered and mutually resembling levels of being) became constitutive, in the post-Vedic period, of cosmic and social order in a way that precisely paralleled the earlier conception of the profound necessity of the performance of Vedic ritual for the sake of cosmic stability. Thus, by the time of the Dharmaśāstras, the role of stabilising agent, has been extended (at least ideally) to all beings as an ongoing existential commitment to the stabilising practice of the performance of *dharma.* Hacker defines this conception of *dharma* as '[…] a concrete, positive […] model of conduct that has already existed before its realization in some way' (P. Hacker, 'Dharma in Hinduismus,' *Zeitschrift für Missionwissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 49 (1965): 103). This description of *dharma* resonates with the notion of *smṛti* as a process of recovery. The narrativised rituals of the *Mahābhārata* concretise, socialise, and provide an interpretive arena for, this the progressive 'dharmacisation' of early south Asian religious discourse by situating ritual activity in determinate cosmic and social contexts.

spilled over the conceptual confines of <sacrificial ritualism> and came to encompass virtually the entire range of activities of Sanskrit society.[92]

This extension of the *dharma* concept is part of a wider exegetical process that is not, of course, limited to the Brāhmaṇas, Gṛhya Sūtras and the *Mahābhārata*: Patton suggests:

> The *Nirukta* intends to illuminate nothing less than the Vedic language as a whole, while Śabara and the *Bṛhaddevatā* intend to explain the *mantra* as a crucial aspect of Vedic knowledge […] the *Bṛhaddevatā*'s taxonomies push the boundaries of Vedic language outside the ritual into the mouths of the gods, the heroes of the past, and the ritual priests.[93]

The *Mahābhārata* also projects the sacrifice, and with it *dharma,* into a world of narrative action in the significant past.[94] The text, however, then goes even further; it explicitly connects a form of discourse very like itself to *dharmic* kingship and to social and cosmic order. The *Mahābhārata*, in this way, constitutes both divine and earthly sovereigns as 'stabilising agents,' on the model of Prajāpati, who are in turn dependent on a considerably expanded range of textual 'stabilising practices.' These 'stabilising practices' all recover lost forms of Vedic knowledge. These acts of 'recovery,' in fact, constitute a series of hermeneutic innovations regarding, amongst other things, sovereignty, *dharma*, and textual activity. In this way, the text constructs a model of sovereignty and the significant past that justifies and augments the power

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[92] S. Pollock, 'The Revelation of Tradition.'

[93] L. Patton, *Myth as Argument*, 134.

[94] In addition, the *Mahābhārata*, to an extent, 'inverts,' or at least extends, the exegetic order of practice in the Vedas and Vedāṅgas. Both Jan Houben and Michael Witzel have analysed the extent to which the pragmatics of ritual practice had an impact on the form of their supporting, and even competing, mythologemes. Witzel comments, for example: The Brāhmaṇa authors, indeed, had all the freedom to tell whatever story might appear plausible or appropriate to them in order to explain the problem in question […] One should not forget that they did so in constant competition with other ritual specialists or even with whole schools of specialists. Consequently, they had to come forward with ever new, more ingenious, or simply baffling explanations (see M. Witzel, 'On the Origin of the 'Frame Story' in Old Indian Literature,' in *Hinduismus und Buddhismus Festschrift für Ulrich Schneider*, ed. Harry Falk, Hedwig Falk, Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 1987, 406–7). While Jan Houben suggests that ritual structure functioned as a 'laboratory of early speculative reflection' (see J. Houben, 'The ritual pragmatics of a Vedic hymn: the 'Riddle Hymn' and the Pravargya Ritual,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, 4 (2000): 529). In the case of the *Mahābhārata*, it is no longer the precise details of the ritual forms which stimulate narrative activity, but rather it is the ritually derived mythologeme, and, very often, further narratives of ritual performances in the human past, that themselves provide the basis for further narrative elaborations. Thus we are dealing with second order processes of the exegesis of exegesis, in which earlier forms of narrative elaboration are the point of departure for new interpretations. This is, I think, a far more serviceable characterisation of *aitihāsika* practice than Pollock's characterisation of them as 'a mode of explanation that viewed the Vedic texts as what they are, historical-cultural products' ('From discourse of ritual to discourse of power in Sanskrit culture,' *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4 (1990): 315–45). What we are, in fact, seeing in the *Mahābhārata* (and from which we might infer something of the hermeneutic methodologies of the lost *aitihāsikas*) is the treatment of Vedic *practice* as historical-cultural product.

of its own form of narrative discourse while indexing a complex series of conceptual developments in early South Asian religious discourse.

My analyses show that a secondary function of this movement from ritual to narrative practice is that, just as the ritual manual guides and models actual practice, so too the *Mahābhārata* models narrative practice. We will now take up these issues in a broader examination of the strategies employed in the *Mahābhārata* for the exploration of the significant past.

The exploration of the significant past
in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*

Paul Ricoeur has produced a brilliant, and succinct, analysis of the general failure in critical theory to develop an adequate appreciation of narrative time:

> Here we hit upon a temporal constitution which is completely overlooked in the theory of action by anti-narrativist arguments and in literary criticism by structuralist claims. Both take it for granted that narrative as such is merely chronological and that chronology means abstract succession. This is why no other device seems to remain open except a subordination of sequential history to explanatory history, on the one hand, or the reduction of the chronology of the narrative message to the a-temporality of narrative codes. What is overlooked in both camps is *the tremendous complexity of narrative time*.[95]

Having addressed something of the *Mahābhārata*'s rich discourse on sacrificial, textual and cosmic origins, I will now turn to the specifics of the 'tremendous complexity' of narrative time in the *Mahābhārata*. I will argue that the *Mahābhārata* sets up a complex model of the significant past that builds on its foundational interrelationship of sacrificial and textual, as well as cosmic and social, process. I will further suggest that the orientation to the past in the *Mahābhārata* provides prompts and clues as to how it might be transmitted and adapted by its performers and audiences. This argument can be substantiated with a case study.

We shall take as an example the case of the tragic history of Karṇa. The birth of Karṇa is narrated in detail in the Āraṇyakaparvan[96] as part of the story of how Indra begged the earrings and armour of the semi-divine Karṇa from him in order to help neutralise his threat to the great Pāṇḍava warrior Arjuna. Unbeknownst to either party is the fact of Karṇa being the elder brother of the five Pāṇḍavas. Karṇa is the son of the sun (Surya). His mother Kuntī had obtained a boon such that she could conjure up any god. Her first youthful experiment with this newfound power ended in the birth of the glorious Karṇa, just as her subsequent use of the power had the consequence of the birth of three boys (Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna) to herself and twins to her co-wife

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[95] P. Ricoeur, 'The human experience of time and narrative,' *Research in Phenomenology* 9 (1979): 27, my italics.
[96] *Mbh* 3.284–94.

Mādrī (Nakula and Sahadeva), these being the five Pāṇḍavas ('sons' of King Pāṇḍu). As a maiden, Kuntī felt unable to keep the baby Karṇa and instead decided to abandon him, floating him in a basket down the river Aśva. He was found by the *sūta*, charioteer, Adhiratha who adopted him and brought him up ignorant of his semi-divine *kṣatriya* origins. Karṇa leads a somewhat complicated life: much of it is taken up with the gathering of armaments with which to defeat the Pāṇḍavas. This is because he is the close friend and confidant of the Kaurava prince Duryodhana, who is the sworn enemy of the five sons of Pāṇḍu. Having been told of his birth in the Āraṇyakaparvan we hear an account of his past from his own mouth in the Karṇaparvan. At this point in the main plot of the *Mahābhārata*, Karṇa is generalissimo of the Kaurava forces and locked in horrific combat with the Pāṇḍavas on the field of the Kurus, *kurukṣetra*. We hear, among other things, of his cursing by the Bhargava *brāhmaṇa* Rāma.[97] Karṇa had entered the great warrior *brāhmaṇa*'s service under false pretences in order to obtain knowledge of terrible missile weapons (*astra*). While his preceptor was sleeping on his lap Karṇa's thigh (*ūru*) is pierced (*bheda*) by a slender and variegated worm (*kīṭa*).[98] Karṇa endured the terrible pain and did not disturb Rāma. However, when Rāma awoke and saw what had happened he immediately recognised that such a capacity to endure physical pain was the mark of the *kṣatriya* and not the *brāhmaṇa*. He curses Karṇa to forget the use of the missile weapon (*astra*) he has taught him when he needs it most.

A re-telling of this tale occurs in the Śāntiparvan.[99] Nārada, however, goes into considerably more descriptive detail, most especially in relation to the worm (*kṛmi*):

> The worm delighted in phlegm (*śleshman*), flesh (*māṁsa*) and blood (*śoṇita*) as food […]. (He had) eight feet (*aṣṭa-pāda*), sharp teeth (*tīkṣṇa-daṃṣṭra*) and he was covered in needle (*sūci*) like hair (*roma*), his limbs were drawn up, Alarka was his name.[100]

We are granted a comprehensive vision of this foul worm as if to focus the attention of the audience for the subsequent narrative expansion of his role. The narrative continues with a history of the cursing of that worm. The worm explains that he had formerly been a great asura (*mahāsura*) and that he had been cursed for ravishing the spouse of the great sage Bhṛgu. The term of the curse was to last until the destruction of his worm-form at the hands of Rāma, descendant of Bhṛgu.

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[97] *Mbh* 8.29. The incident of the worm is at *Mbh* 8.29.4–7.
[98] *Mbh* 8.29.5
[99] *Mbh* 12.3.
[100] *Mbh* 12.3.6a and 12.3.13:
   atha kṛmiḥ śleṣmamayo māṁsaśoṇitabhojanaḥ
   and
   aṣṭapādaṁ tīkṣṇadaṁṣṭraṁ sūcībhir iva saṁvṛtam
   romabhiḥ saṁniruddhāṅgam alarkaṁ nāma nāmataḥ

Let us consider the way in which narrative time is used in this sequence of narrations that span the Āraṇya, Karṇa and Śānti parvans. The details of Karṇa's past are always addressed situationally in relation to a given narrative 'present.' As we saw, his birth is narrated in the context of Indra's plot to steal from him the earrings and armour given to him by his father, the sun. Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana of the origins of the armour not of Karṇa.[101] In our second text, Karṇa narrates some of the salient points in his personal history in order to gain the confidence of his deliberately critical charioteer Śalya. Nārada's recounting of the life and deeds of Karṇa in the opening of the Śāntiparvan occurs in the context of the post-mortem revelation of his identity as the senior brother of the Pāṇḍavas at the close of the Strīparvan. We thus have a series of three context-dependent narrations that 'back-form' the past from the narrative present. This stands as something of a 'prompt' to encourage further such narrations. That is to say, the significant past is constructed as that which impacts upon the present and that which is to be selectively explored from that present. Furthermore, Nārada, as a subsequent teller of the tale, elaborates and extends it. This structure mirrors that of the encompassing narratives of the entire text in which the *Mahābhārata* is itself narrated as an exploration of the significant past of Śaunaka (who calls for, and emphasises, Bhargava agency in the great Bhārata) and Janamejaya (the lineal descendant of the Pāṇḍavas). More than this, it implicitly models a means of exploring the past for readers and hearers of the text, as the implication of the accumulating narrations is one of the capacity for almost any given detail of the main narrative to be explored. All these processes act in combination with the order of narration in the Sanskrit text: In which the narrative activity moves from a direct pupil of the author to a direct descendant of the protagonists of the main plot; to one of a professional story-teller (a *sūta*) to the head of a prominent Brahmin lineage (of Bhṛgu). This shift widens the range of potential participants considerably and allows for the extrapolation of a widening circle of addressees. This order of narration thus succeeds in acting as a narrative mirror of the transmission of the text in time amongst individuals further and further removed from the events of the main narrative. Even as this occurs, there is a reciprocal movement in which the text plunges deeper and deeper into the details of the past. The matter is more complex even than this, however.

If we move from the birth of Karṇa to details of his life and to the details of the life of the worm that bored into his thigh, a certain structure begins to reveal itself. This form of the narrative construction of the significant past is one of *recursive elaboration.* A character is introduced: details of his life are described: the details of the details of the details are described. By the time this has occurred, we are sensitised to a process of the repetition of a core narrative strategy. The past is thus opened to potentially endless exploration.[102]

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[101] *Mbh* 3.287.1.

[102] That this may have, to an extent, become a feature of the art of poetic composition evinced in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* can be seen in M. Brockington, 'The Art of Backwards Composition: Some Narrative Techniques in Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa,' in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and*

This is, I would argue, is characteristic of the model of discourse surrounding the significant past that we find in the *Mahābhārata*. As one moves backward from one narration to another one can continue to elaborate potentially *ad infinitum.* This is itself reflective of the Vedic ritual and particularly the *sattra.* In his *Ritual and Mantra*, Staal notes that it is the *sattra* rituals which are most amenable to indefinite expansion and which were recognised as such by early Indian commentators to a proverbial degree. Patañjali refers, in his *Mahābhāṣya*, to *sattra* rituals in a comparison developed to express the creativity of natural language:

> There are indeed linguistic expressions that are never used [...]. Even though they are not used, they have of necessity to be laid down by rules just like protracted *sattras*.[103]

Thus the Vedic *soma* ritual which provides the context for both the encompassing narratives of the *Mahābhārata*, and which is performed solely for the benefit of its participants (rather than for a patron), is one that provides a model of potentially endless structural expansion.[104] This allows us to see something of the interpretive range of the *Mahābhārata* as a means of churning the *kathā-amṛta*. The three texts concerning Karṇa I have selected do not occur in the same parvan, neither are they explicitly interrelated by the interlocutors of the various encompassing narratives. They represent, instead, the progressive elaboration of the past of Karṇa and the details of that past even down to those beings, like the worm whose appearance is barely even a cameo.

This 'sacrificial' understanding of the past is reflected in the account of the death of Karṇa, in which we find an expression of some of the most prominent comparative threads of the text:

> Thus this destruction (*kṣaya*) occurred when Karṇa and Arjuna clashed (*sam-āgama*). Even as Indra slew Vṛtra and Rāma slew Rāvaṇa, even as Kṛṣṇa slew Mura, stuck down in battle [...] even as Skanda slew Mahiṣa and Rudra slew Andhaka [...] Arjuna slew, O king, in a

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Relationships, Proceedings of the First Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas (August 1997), ed. M. Brockington and P. Schreiner, Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1999, 99–110.

[103] F. Staal, *Ritual and Mantra: Rules Without Meaning*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996, 89, citing *Mahābhāṣya* I: 8.23; 9.15 (ed. Kielhorn).

[104] A related, but somewhat different, parallel between the *sattra* and the interlocutary structure of the *Mahābhārata* was first noted by C.Z. Minkowski (see his 'Janamejaya's Sattra and Ritual Structure'). His argument posited a link between the *Mahābhārata* and the Vedic *sattra* in terms of the common occurrence in text and ritual of a complex recursive frame structure. That is to say, the placing of rites within rites prefigured the placing of stories within stories. M. Witzel also developed a similar hypothesis for the Brāhmaṇa literature (See his 'On the Origin of the 'Frame Story' in Old Indian Literature'). I have analysed the structural interrelationships of the *Mahābhārata* and the recursive *sattra* in some detail in a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 'Extracting the *kathā-amṛta* (Elixir of Story): Creation, Ritual, Sovereignty and Textual Structure in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.'

chariot duel (*dvairatha*), a fierce battle (*yuddha-durmada*) with all his kinsmen, Karṇa best of warriors.[105]

Texts of this kind make of the past an elaborate network of *bandhu* like connections. Even the use of the particle *yathā* here reflects the precise mode of establishing connections in the Brāhmaṇas; characters and events become, to an extent, *pratimās* (reflections) of one another. In this way, both Vedic ritual forms and Vedically derived strategies of interpretation recur both in the accounts of the origin of divine and human kingship and in the structure of the approach to the significant past itself. This form of elaboration of the past is not an isolated occurrence in the *Mahābhārata*.[106] The details of Bhīṣma's birth, the circumstances surrounding the deeply anomalous fact of Princess Draupadī's five husbands, the absence of Kṛṣṇa from the dicing game in the Sabhāparvan—all these and more are subject to a process of narrative inflation and elaboration of the significant past that resonates with the

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[105] *Mbh* 8.4.51b–53a and 54:

evam eṣa kṣayo vṛttaḥ karṇārjunasamāgame
mahendreṇa yathā vṛtro yathā rāmeṇa rāvaṇaḥ
yathā kṛṣṇena nihato muro raṇanipātitaḥ
kārtavīryaś ca rāmeṇa bhārgaveṇa hato yathā

tathārjunena nihato dvairathe yuddhadurmadaḥ
sāmātyabāndhavo rājan karṇaḥ praharatāṃ varaḥ
and 8.4.53, star passage (illustrating further elaboration):
8*21.1: yathā skandena mahiṣo yathā rudreṇa cāndhakaḥ

[106] The narrative elaboration of the past is marked and continuous. The circumstances and causes of the birth of Bhīṣma are narrated at *Mbh* 1.191–4 and traced back to the fault of the Vasus. The polyandrous union of Draupadī and the Pāṇḍava brothers is explained through three narratives of quite different causes, one of them suggesting that it was the result of an ardent girl's repeated implorings of Śiva for a husband (five times and hence five husbands) at *Mbh* 1.157, another as a result of Indra's offence of Śiva at *Mbh* 1.189 and the third as a result of a declaration by Kuntī at *Mbh* 1.182. Kṛṣṇa's absence from the dicing is explained at 3.15–23 in the Saubavadha Upākhyāna. There are many more examples. At *Mbh* 1.101, the chief advisor at the Kuru court Vidura has his birth history related in terms of a taking birth of Dharma himself (which itself is subject to its own peculiar history). The earrings stolen in the course of the narrative concerning the death of Parikṣit (*Mbh* 1.36–40) are discussed again in the Uttaṅka Upākhyāna at *Mbh*.14.52. The birth and life of Droṇa, the martial instructor of the Pāṇḍavas, is examined in detail and has links to the birth of Draupadī and her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna from the sacrificial fire (so that the latter might aid their father, King Drupada, in pursuit of his vendetta against Droṇa). See *Mbh* 1.121, 122 and 153–5. There is also elaboration of the past in terms of the similarity of plight; this is the way in which, for example, the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is introduced as a subordinate narration in the *Mahābhārata* (*Mbh* 3.257–76), when Yudhiṣṭhira asks his recurrent question at *Mbh* 3.257.10: Is there any man less fortunate than I, one that you might have seen before (*dṛṣṭapūrva*) or even heard (*śrutapūrva*) before?

asti nūnaṃ mayā kaścidalpabhāgyataro naraḥ
bhavatā dṛṣṭapūrva vā śrutapūrva æpi vā bhavet

An almost identical question is also the stimulus for the narration of the famous story of Nala. See *Mbh* 3.49.34.

structure of the recursive Vedic ritual and its attendant analogical competencies. Malamoud summarises the matter very well when he says:

> A frequent, nearly automatic, analogy found in the Brahmanism of ancient India maintains that any activity, whether human or divine, possessed of a measure of complexity […] ought to be analysed as a sacrifice—that is, one ought to recognise in it the same persons, ingredients, interplay of forces, arrangements, and the superimposition of meanings that characterise the sacrificial scenario.[107]

Bearing this in mind, we are now in a position to provide something of an overview of the multiple 'temporalities' of the *Mahābhārata*. The text engages in a narrative construction of the past that moves from the multiple narrative 'presents' backwards into the infinitely expandable narrative terrain of potentially significant and interrelated events in the past. This is a figure of backwards expansion that is combined with a reciprocal and equally expansive movement forward in time that is implicit in the order of narration in the Sanskrit text.[108] This is an order of narration that, as we have seen, is marked by the diversification of its key interlocutors as we move through its encompassing narratives (from a direct pupil of the author to a professional bard). All of this is undertaken in the context of a complex strategy of the encompassment of Vedic ritual functions in the *Mahābhārata* which was the subject of the analyses of the previous section.[109] This 'encompassing' narrative exegesis focuses, in particular, on the roles and functions of ritual and textual activity and the necessity of the assumption of the role of stabilising agent at the levels of both gods and human beings. The

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[107] C. Malamoud, *Cooking the World*, 162.

[108] It is also important to note that the arguments of this paper concerning strategies of narration and the significant past also relate to general questions pertaining to lower criticism in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. The complex narrative unfolding of the *Mahābhārata* is reflected in, amongst other things, the shift from *textus simplicior* to *textus ornatior* in the manuscript tradition of the text. This has been borne out at the most general level by my extensive use of the, generally considered as 'late,' Śāntiparvan and my use of star and appendicised passages from the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* in this paper. The idea that the expansion of a given text can be the result of its internal narrative structure and not solely extra-textual issues of transmission and adaptation (or perhaps better that these two dimensions of communicative practice are in dialogue), while acceptable in the study of oral tradition, is one that is under-emphasised in the study of written Sanskrit texts. These developmental considerations have been neatly encapsulated by Sheldon Pollock as the 'ontology of interpolation' (and elegantly developed by Laurie Patton in whose work the phrase appears) (see L. Patton, *Myth as Argument*, 13). Patton glosses this as a process of engaging with a given text 'as a series of choices and investments by motivated authors' (ibid., 13).

[109] What is offered is a particular mode of considering the past in relation to the present. This has implications as a model of textual transmission and is, to an extent, reflected in the recurrence of key *Mahābhārata* interlocutors and places of narration in later Purāṇic literature (see G. Bonazzoli, 'Places of Purāṇic Recitation According to the Purāṇas,' *Purāṇa* 23 (1981): 48–59). I am not simply arguing for the evocation of an oral context but rather a very developed model of a form of narrative practice which draws on the inter-referential and analogic Vedic/ brāhmaṇic competencies but does so in such a way that the model becomes amenable to application in pursuit of radically anti-Vedic/ brāhmaṇic goals. This has historical, ideological and theological ramifications which remain largely unexplored in this paper.

multiple narrativisations of ritual practice in the *Mahābhārata* thus push the Vedic conceptual order into a highly creative engagement with wider social life.[110] Indeed, social life is brought into the orbit of Vedic constructivism. Patton's work is, again, instructive:

> any study of exegetical totalization […] must take into account the vast, encyclopaedic nature of such projects […] used to show the *infinite applicability of canon to human situations.*[111]

This is to say, returning to our introduction, that the *Mahābhārata* is ideally structured to act as an application of narrative theory in early South Asian religious discourse. It presents *hypotheses about the world*, about the ritual origins of cosmos and the dependence of creation on textual activity, *as well its own discourse,* in the elaborate examinations of key events and characters within the text, *combined with a paradigm to explain or encourage further interpretation of these phenomena*, in which a range of core Vedic interpretive competencies are deployed. These competencies centre on an assumption of the creative function of ritual practice and the concomitant competence in establishing connections (*bandhu*) between different orders and levels of ritually derived being.

Conclusions

My paper began by posing a basic question: 'How do social groups constitute ideas and events in the past as significant and in relationship to what presuppositions and what other forms of discourse or practice?' My analyses focused on narrative approaches to the past in early South Asia as a mode of exegetical and theoretical practice in relation to pre-existing forms of social knowledge (rather than as a form of 'failed' or at least 'inadequate' historiography). In the specific case of the *Mahābhārata*, I demonstrated a narrative construction of the significant past that pursued an agenda of faithfulness to certain core Vedic ritual conceptions of the nature of cosmic and social action, but which preserved a restless capacity for innovation and commentary in relation to these core postulates and practices. In particular, I

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[110] This paper does not take up the radical emphasis on contingency in the *Mahābhārata*. This can be seen in the description of the complex and often problematic genealogies of its key protagonists and furthermore in the recurrent emphasis on the interruption of sacrifice (or when it is completed, its often ambivalent aftermath), as well as through its broad foregrounding of the uncertain outcomes of war and the pursuit of revenge (which Malamoud calls the 'opposite of sacrifice,' see *Cooking the World*, 163). Almost everything, from reproductive to sacrificial processes, as well as much else besides, is called into question. The *Mahābhārata*'s approach to the past subverts the very authority it seeks to claim for itself repeatedly. Like the interrupted, or horrifically successful, sacrifices with which the *Mahābhārata* concerns itself, the text evokes a model of practice in order to push it to its very limits and beyond. This remains a topic for further research.

[111] L. Patton, *Myth as Argument*, 442 (my italics).

considered the way in which the *Mahābhārata* extends the edifice of Vedic ritual constructivism to encompass other forms of textual activity. In this way, the *Mahābhārata* both employs and adapts pre-existing modes of religious thought and practice. In addition to this, I considered the way in which the *Mahābhārata* establishes an approach to the past which allows, potentially, for its endless extension and adaptation. Taken together, these features of the *Mahābhārata*'s approach to the significant past allow the text to both 'debate' the past and, more than this, debate the nature and function of ritual and textual activity in post-Vedic contexts. In this way, I demonstrated that the *Mahābhārata* is heavily invested in a process of encompassing the functions, competencies and capacities of the Vedas. This is achieved both by transposing their 'intrinsic technologies' (in this case the pressing of the *soma/ amṛta*), and by the recurrent 'tactic' of historically contextualising (and thus 'concretising') their ritual activities in a complex network of narratives and narrative practice. The 'effect' that was thus transmitted was both the applicability of Vedic forms of practice and analysis to extra-ritual contexts and the possibility of, and indeed emphasis upon, the recapitulation of Vedic knowledge (and access to its attendant potencies) in alternate forms.

These aspects of the *Mahābhārata* must, in turn, take their place in the analysis of wider forms of Vedic exegesis and religious and social change in early South Asia.[112] Such an analysis must seek to integrate a wide variety of textual and historical developments in the context of what Sheldon Pollock has termed the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis.'[113] This is Pollock's designation for the full range of dominant 'cultural–political practices' (which encompasses intellectual traffic, temple building, city planning, and geographical nomenclature) which, taken together, characterise knowledge and state formation in South and South East Asia in the first millennium of the common era.[114] Pollock suggests that the spread of 'political Sanskrit' in this period is 'without parallel in world history.'[115] He goes on to state:

> No organised political power such as the Roman imperium was involved. No colonization of South India or Southeast Asia can be shown to have occurred […]. Sanskrit was not diffused by any single, unified, scripture-based religion impelled by religious revolution or new revelation […]. Sanskrit never functioned as a link language like other transregional codes such as Greek, Latin, Arabic […]. In fact, nothing indicates that in this period Sanskrit was an everyday medium of communication anywhere […].'[116]

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[112] From the etymologies of the *Nirukta* to the explanations and narratives of the *Bṛhaddevatā*, from the Mīmāṃsic and Dharmasūtric development of the *dharma* concept, to the status claims of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the magical cross-applications of Vedic language in the Vidhāna literature, from Upaniṣadic speculation, to Jaina and Buddhist discourse on the nature of sacrifice and the true *brāhmaṇa*, and much else besides.

[113] S. Pollock, 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, 1 (1998): 1.

[114] Ibid., 12.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

For Pollock, the Sanskrit Cosmopolis is 'periphery without centre, community without unity' and is dependent on Sanskrit as an 'aesthetic practice.'[117] What Pollock does here, however, is describe, but not explain, the essence of the Sanskrit and Sanskritically derived knowledge systems of early South and South East Asia. In fact, and I base my inference on my analyses of the relation of the *Mahābhārata* to earlier forms of religious discourse, the origins of the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' might lie in 'hermeneutic' rather than in strictly 'aesthetic' practice.

The 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' must be 'explained,' or at least explored, as an outgrowth of the basic presuppositions, institutions and practices described and analysed in the Vedic corpus (and the varied exegetical trajectories to which they gave rise). By this, I am suggesting that that which facilitated the spread of forms of religiously and politically empowered Sanskritic knowledge in the first millennium of the common era was the powerful cross-application to extra-ritual contexts of fundamentally Vedic practices, competencies and self-understandings. Chief amongst these were the obsession with generative rule systems and an overarching hermeneutic of hierarchy and resemblance. Such broad contentions have by no means been proven by the analyses of this paper. It was my intention, however, that my characterisation of the *Mahābhārata*'s relation to the Vedic corpus should contribute to this analysis of the 'mechanisms,' 'categories'[118] and presuppositions of post-Vedic early South Asian religious discourse.

My analyses, then, have shown how the shift from 'discourse of ritual' to 'discourse of power' in early South Asia is both indexed and shaped by the *Mahābhārata*'s construction of the significant past. This 'codification of historical memory' is allied to a discourse on sovereignty and narrative practice that provides a dynamic demonstration of the assumption of ritual power by alternate institutions and textual forms in early South Asia. This research must be developed in relation to further and deeper analyses of forms and modes of governance and social change in South, and even South-East, Asia in this period. The impact of the north-east Indian heterodoxies (Jaina and Buddhist) and wider socio-linguistic issues (which are most clearly indexed by the passage of the Prākrits from languages of royal decree and sophisticated protest to the objects of dramatic scorn in this period)[119] must also be assessed. Such analyses must proceed with a degree of caution in regard to the

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[117] Ibid., 15.

[118] I draw these terms from a comment made by Sheldon Pollock on the discursive domination of forms of Sanskrit knowledge in early South Asia: 'what we lack (is) an analysis of its mechanisms, its categories, the ways in which its is constructed and works.' See 'From Discourse of Ritual to Discourse of Power,' 333.

[119] See Madhav Deshpande, *Sanskrit and Prakrit: Some Sociolinguistic Issues*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993, 15. For the growing dominance of Sanskrit in the epigraphic record in the early common era in South Asia, see R. Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice,* Delhi: Government Publications, 1973, 51.

received vocabularies of distinctive 'cultures' in this period from 'Brahminical' and 'Buddhist' to 'Mauryan' and 'Guptan.'[120] So also must our genre typologies, and characterisations of the range and forms of early South Asian expressive practice, move beyond current modes of categorisation as myth, manual or philosophy. The lack of comprehension of the origins and principals of the prominence, indeed dominance, of the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' might then be revealed to be, at least partially, a product of the very theoretical categories that we bring to bear on the subject matter itself.

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[120] Other than, of course, as heuristic tools.

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