VEDIC MYTH AND RITUAL IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

VEDIC MYTH AND RITUAL IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*:

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE

MAHĀPRASTHĀNIKA- AND *SVARGĀROHAṆA- PARVANS*

By

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Abstract

This dissertation undertakes an analysis of the two concluding books of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* or "Great Epic of India." Although the *Mahābhārata* is traditionally understood as a *smṛti* or "remembered" work in contradistinction to the Vedic corpus of "heard" (*śruti*) scripture, I argue in this thesis that we can best understand the content and configuration of the *Mahābhārata*'s two final books by reading them against a background of Vedic ritual and myth. Adopting this hermeneutical approach, I treat the two key narrative issues which we find developed at the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion: the manner in which the poem's principal characters die (chapters two and three of the thesis), and the account of their afterlife fates (chapter four of the thesis). In chapter two I argue that a Vedic ritual called the *yātsattra* helped to shape the substance and sequence of the narrative account of the epic heroes' deaths. In chapter three I pursue this issue further, arguing that, as elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, the *yātsattra* in Books 17 and 18 is tied to the later ritual institution of circumambulatory pilgrimage or *tīrthayātrā*, a rite also figuring in the account of the characters' deaths. In treating the second narrative issue in chapter four, I examine the backdrop of Vedic myth which underlies the narrative of the entire *Mahābhārata*, and which is restated at the conclusion of the poem. As in chapters two and three, I argue that in order to understand the *Mahābhārata*'s final scenes, we must appreciate the extent to which the poem has been fashioned against the paradigm of the Veda and its ritual and mythic world.

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Note on fonts, typographical conventions and transliteration

This document was prepared in Times CSX+ font, obtained from John Smith's website: http://bombay.oriental.cam.ac.uk/ and Times New Roman.

The "s" of Sanskrit terms pluralized in English are not italicized: pl. *saṁhitās*, *kṣatriyas*. These are to be distinguished from fully italicized Sanskrit terms terminating in -s: *tapas*, *manas*, etc.

All translations from Sanskrit, German and French are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Square brackets within quotations mark my own insertions.

The following scheme of macrons applies for the transliteration of Sanskrit into Roman characters:

आ	ā
ई	ī
ऊ	ū
ऋ	ṛ
ॠ	ṝ
ङ्	ṅ
ञ्	ñ
ट्	ṭ
ठ्	ṭh
ड्	ḍ
ढ्	ḍh
ण्	ṇ
श्	ś
ष्	ṣ
:	ḥ
anusvāra	ṁ
ऽ	'

नारायणं नमस्कृत्य नरं चैव नरोत्तमम्।
देवीं सरस्वतीं चैव ततो जयमुदीरयेत्।।

nārāyaṇaṁ namaskṛtya naraṁ caiva narottamam |
devīṁ sarasvatīṁ caiva tato jayam udīrayet ||

Having honoured Nārāyaṇa and Nara, that foremost
of men, and the Goddess Sarasvatī as well, then the
Victory should be recited.

INTRODUCTION

The *Mahābhārata* or "Great [Epic] of India" might well be the most important text in the entire history of South Asia. Were one to challenge such an audacious claim, it would likely be in order to cite the *Mahābhārata*'s sister epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* or "Course of Rāma," as a work more worthy of such valuation. However, few scholars of Indian history and civilization would hasten to nominate a third candidate for first rank in tracing the key sources of South Asian religion and culture. The *Mahābhārata*, like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, represents a veritable index to the religious, philosophical, ritual, ethical, mythic, and legal traditions of India, and its narrative has been sung, danced, recited, epitomized and enacted in every region of India for over 1500 years. I should be pleased to think that this dissertation makes even a modest contribution to the extensive scholarship on a poem so crucial for our understanding of the religious and cultural life of South Asia.

The *Mahābhārata* is often thought to be the work of many hands, but many centuries ago was consolidated in a comprehensive act of editing which produced the form of the text we have today. One of the most important touchstones of meaning for those responsible for this redaction was the Veda, India's ancient corpus of ritual and myth.[1] As such, the *Mahābhārata*, although it is not a Vedic text, was created and constituted into its present form by those for whom the Vedic world was a key frame of reference. This dissertation is concerned with the concluding episodes of the *Mahābhārata*, and seeks to highlight precisely this Vedic aspect or dimension of the poem.

Below I will lay out the dissertation's principal concerns in a more systematic way. First, however, we will acquaint ourselves with the *Mahābhārata* in general terms, and subsequently introduce an important issue of scholarship on the epic. In acquainting ourselves with the text, we will take note of both Western academic and traditional Hindu understandings of the origin and character of the work, and subsequently review the poem's basic contents. Its name, literally the "Great India," is usually rendered the "Great Epic/Narrative of India."[2] It is a

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[1] The Vedic corpus centers on ritual sacrifice, and consists of the *Rgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*; each of these Vedas contains: i) a *mantra* portion (the hymns and liturgy used in the rituals); ii) a *brāhmaṇa* portion (extensive prose commentary on the *mantras*, often including myths explaining the origins of the rituals); iii) an *āraṇyaka* portion (philosophical speculations on the meaning of the rituals) and iv) an *upaniṣad* portion (philosophical speculations on the meaning of the rituals as well as more general philosophical issues such as the nature of the self and ground of reality). In the case of each of the four Vedas, the *mantra* and *brāhmaṇa* sections deal directly with ritual. In addition, later texts appended to the Vedic corpus such as the *śrauta sūtras* elaborate further upon the mechanics of the sacrifices. When in this dissertation I speak of Vedic myth and ritual, I refer particularly to the *mantra* and *brāhmaṇa* portions of the Vedas and to their associated extra-canonical ritual literature.

[2] The mythic King Bharata is introduced in the *Mahābhārata* itself as a forefather of the poem's characters (1.62-69) (unless stated otherwise, text references are to the Critical Edition of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute; see below). From this name derives the patronymic

Sanskrit poem dating back at least to the late 5th century CE,[3] and is traditionally said to total some 100,000 verses.[4] Western scholarship on the text has predominantly asserted a gradual growth model for the poem, hypothesizing several centuries of formation through interpolation and expansion. In defining the literary genre of the *Mahābhārata*, Western scholars have often conceived of the poem as "epic," principally on account of its perceived similarities, in both form and content, with the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*.[5] Below I will make frequent use of the term epic to characterize the poem, and I define the term here loosely as a lengthy narrative, the events of which are presented as both mythic and historic, and which centers on characters understood to be the distant ancestors of humankind.

As for the *Mahābhārata*'s place of origin, it is impossible to identify a location any more specific than the Northern half of the Indian subcontinent. Although in South India today the poem is as well known and loved as anywhere else, and maintains its own unique *Mahābhārata* traditions, the epic's origins were very likely northern, as the story takes place in Āryāvarta or North-Central India, and makes Indraprastha (the area of modern Delhi) one of its principal centers of action. Meanwhile the epic authors' geographical knowledge south of the Vindhya mountain range (modern Madhya Pradesh) is thin at best.

Introducing the *Mahābhārata* from the perspective of the Hindu tradition of course yields a different picture: the poem is ascribed to a sage named Vyāsa (lit. "arranger;" also known as Veda Vyāsa or Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa), who is said to have collected the *Vedas* or ancient ritual and philosophical texts which

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Bhārata or "descendant of Bharata," which came to refer first to the area of North-Central India, and today to the entire country.

[3] The earliest evidence for the existence of a form of the *Mahābhārata* comparable in size to the form of the text we have today is an inscription of 532-533 CE. King Sarvanātha of Ucchakapla refers in a land grant inscription to the poem as consisting of 100,000 verses. See Georg Bühler and Johann Kirste, "Indian Studies - no.II: Contributions to the History of the Mahâbhârata." *Sitzungsberichte: Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien. Philosophisch- historische Klasse* 127, no. 12 (1892): 26. The dating scheme of E. Washburn Hopkins, perhaps the most oft-cited hypothesis on the dating of the text, draws on both evidence external to the poem and the internal evidence of the text's meter and formal elements. He sets the *terminus a quo* at 400 BCE and *terminus ad quem* at 400 CE. See Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India: Character and Origin of the Mahābhārata* (C. Scribner's Sons, New York, 1901), 397-398.

[4] This total entails the inclusion of an appendix to the text, the *Harivaṁśa*; the *Mahābhārata* as constituted today in the Critical Edition of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (see below) totals 73,650 verses without this appendix. Its most common verse form, called *śloka*, is a genre of meter known as *anuṣṭubh*, and consists of 32 syllables broken into 4 × 8 units or *padas*. A single verse thus consists of two lines of 16 syllables each. This metric form is also used in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, and in the numerous popular works of mythology and lore known as *Purāṇas*.

[5] See, for example A.B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 13; N.J. Allen, "Arjuna and Odysseus: A Comparative Approach." *South Asia Library Group Newsletter* 40 (1993): 39-42. The *Rāmāyaṇa* has been treated similarly: Robert Antoine, "Calliope and the Epic of Rāvaṇa." *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* 11 (1973): 45-92.

represent the ultimate scriptural authority in the Hindu tradition. The events of the poem mark the close of the *Dvāpara Yuga* or third great eon of time lasting 864,000 years, and marks the beginning of our current eon, the *Kali Yuga* (to last 432,000 years).

Traditional Hindu taxonomies of literature, meanwhile, can place the *Mahābhārata* within a variety of overlapping scriptural frameworks or categories. In general terms, it shares with many other works the status of *smṛti* or "works that are remembered." Such works are highly revered and ascribed to ancient sages such as Vyāsa and Manu (a figure somewhat analogous to Adam in Judeo-Christian tradition), but are nonetheless distinguished from *śruti* or "works that are heard," that is, the four Vedas.[6] The Vedas enjoy the highest status of any literature in brahminical tradition; they are understood to be revealed truth received by humankind, but ultimately *apauruṣeya* or not originating from mortals. However, we will see below that this traditional typology, which distinctly sets the *Mahābhārata* apart from the Veda, must be qualified if we are to understand the epic.

Other genres within which the *Mahābhārata* may be subsumed are *itihāsa*, *purāṇa*, *dharmaśāstra* and *kāvya*. The term *itihāsa* (lit. "just as it was") is sometimes compounded with *purāṇa*, lit. an "ancient" work of myth, legends, and royal lineages.[7] A strict distinction between *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* is difficult to draw in terms of style or content. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is also considered an *itihāsa*, while the term *purāṇa* refers more often to a large body of literature than it does to the *Mahābhārata* itself. More distinctly, however, the poem is understood to offer, in both its narrative contents and more didactic or theoretical portions, instruction on law, righteousness and ethics. As such the *Mahābhārata* is said to be a *dharmaśāstra* or treatise on *dharma* — a key term encompassing the notions of justice, order, duty, righteousness, law and even "religion." Finally, the *Mahābhārata* is sometimes considered a *kāvya* or work of ornate court poetry, although this characterization is more often applied to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, whose author Vālmīki is honored with the title of *Ādikavi* or "First Poet."

Before proceeding to the contents and story of the poem, some important observations on the present form of the text are necessary. Until the 1960's, three published editions of the *Mahābhārata* were predominantly in use: two of these, the Calcutta Edition (published from 1834 to 1839 in four volumes), and the Kumbakonam, (an edition purporting to represent the Southern Recension of the *Mahābhārata*, published from 1906-1914, and reprinted in 1985 in eight volumes) are now seldom used. The third of these older editions of the text is the Bombay Edition, published from 1862-1863 in six volumes. This edition takes for its material the text arranged in Vārāṇasī by a late 17th century commentator named Nīlakaṇṭha Cathurdhara (Chaudhuri), who in his day had created a large

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[6] See above, note 1.

[7] 1.1.204; 1.102.18; 12.50.34.

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manuscript edition of his own and provided commentary upon it.[8] The Bombay Edition is essentially a full publication of this 17th century form of the text, along with the commentary. The Bombay Edition, which followed a traditional Indian manuscript or *pothī* format for its volumes, was then reprinted in 1929-1936 by the Citrashala Press (Pune) in six volumes, in European printing format, also with the running commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha. Both the older Bombay text and the more manageable Citrashala are today often referred to as the "Vulgate" or as "Nīlakaṇṭha's text." Below we will occasionally consult this edition, and grapple with an issue of the *Mahābhārata*'s ending taken up by Nīlakaṇṭha himself in his commentary.

None of these older editions, however, were critical in the strict sense of the term, and so from 1933 until 1966 the *Mahābhārata* was published in the form of the Critical Edition by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune under the general editorship of V.S. Sukthankar. This massive project entailed the collection of manuscripts from all over the subcontinent, and is perhaps one of the most ambitious undertakings in the history of Indology. The Critical Edition offers a basic text abstracted from the many manuscript sources, and an exhaustive account of variants from the critically posited reading in an apparatus appended on each page. This edition of the *Mahābhārata* is by far the most widely consulted today. Unless specified otherwise, all references to the *Mahābhārata* in this dissertation are to the BORI text, which I will refer to as the Critical Edition.

The Critical Edition is naturally the shortest edition of the *Mahābhārata*, as it seeks to define the root text of the poem shared in all manuscripts. Whatever their respective sizes, however, all published editions of the *Mahābhārata* embrace the traditional organization of the work into 18 *parvans* or books.[9] These vary widely in extent, ranging from a mere 106 verses in the case of Book 17, to 12,890 verses in the case of Book 12.[10] The basic narrative of the epic stretching across these 18 books can be summarized as follows.

Book 1, The *Ādiparvan* ("First Book"), opens with a considerable amount of material concerning the text itself, and in particular provides stories pertaining to the actual recitation of the poem. Two distinct narrative frameworks are established at the outset, and are preserved consistently across the epic until its conclusion in Book 18. Below we will examine these narrative frames more closely. The *Ādiparvan* begins by establishing these contexts of recitation and provides a good deal of other introductory material, genealogical tales and scene-setting legends before recounting the birth stories of the poem's principal

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[8] This commentary was complete by 1669, when it was copied by Nīlakaṇṭha's son. Christopher Z. Minkowski, "What Makes a Work 'Traditional'? On the Success of Nīlakaṇṭha's *Mahābhārata* Commentary," in *Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia*, ed. Federico Squarcini (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2005), 242.

[9] This includes the two published editions of the Southern text (Kumbakonam and edition of P.P.S. Sastri), despite the fact that Southern manuscripts divide the text into 24 *parvans*.

[10] Any such figures presented in this dissertation refer to the Critical Edition.

characters, all of whom are of royal blood: the five Pāṇḍava brothers (in order of birth: Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva) and their cousins, the one hundred Kauravas or Dhārtarāṣṭras (of whom the most important is the eldest, Duryodhana). The *Ādiparvan* relates tales of their youth, establishing the mutual animosity between the two sets of cousins, and tells of the marriage of the five Pāṇḍava brothers to a common wife Draupadī. The Pāṇḍavas' most important ally, Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, is also introduced in Book 1.

The central conflict around which the entire epic turns is set off in Book 2, the *Sabhāparvan* ("Book of the [Dicing] Hall"). The kingdom is divided between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana, each based in their own city-center; hence, when the eldest Pāṇḍava Yudhiṣṭhira claims for himself the title of universal sovereign, the long-standing acrimony of Duryodhana is provoked. Duryodhana arranges for an ostensibly friendly game of dice and invites Yudhiṣṭhira, intending to win over, by hook or by crook, all of his cousin's wealth. With the assistance of his wily uncle Śakuni, Duryodhana succeeds and utterly impoverishes the Pāṇḍavas. As part of the pact made during the dice match, Yudhiṣṭhira, his four brothers and their common wife must spend twelve years exiled to the forest wilderness and a thirteenth year in disguise among people.

The twelve years of forest exile are related in Book 3, the *Āraṇyakaparvan* ("Book of the Forest"). Not long after the period of exile begins, Arjuna strikes off on his own in search of magical weapons, correctly anticipating that a war will be necessary for them to regain the kingdom at the end of their period of exile. During his absence the Pāṇḍavas undertake a *tīrthayātrā* or pilgrimage tour to the sacred fording-places of North-Central India. After completing their long tour and reuniting with Arjuna in the northern mountains, they make their way to the kingdom of Virāṭa, where the Pāṇḍavas spend their thirteenth year in disguise. The events of this year are recounted in Book 4, the *Virāṭaparvan* ("Book of Virāṭa"). Having honored the stipulations of the dicing contract, the Pāṇḍavas then return from exile to reclaim the kingdom that is rightfully theirs. Book 5, the *Udyogaparvan* ("Book of the Effort") tells of Duryodhana's obstinate refusal to yield even a tiny portion of the kingdom to his cousins, the futile attempts at negotiation and diplomacy, and the preparations for war.

Books 6 to 9 relate the events of the 18-day battle on Kuru Field. Each of these four "Battle Books" is named after the acting general of the Kaurava army: Bhīṣma (Book 6), Droṇa (Book 7), Karṇa (Book 8), and Śalya (Book 9) each take charge of Duryodhana's soldiers in succession, but all are defeated by the Pāṇḍavas. The most famous portion of the *Mahābhārata* (and perhaps the most well-known piece of Sanskrit literature of all time), the *Bhagavad Gītā* or "Song of the Lord," marks the beginning of the great war in Book 6. Arjuna, grieved at the prospect of fighting his own family, is counseled by his charioteer Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa to take up arms. In the course of the dialogue, Kṛṣṇa reveals his divine nature to Arjuna and inspires him to fight. Kṛṣṇa then goes on to advise the Pāṇḍavas throughout the battle, often urging them to resort to trickery and questionable military conduct.

Through a combination of their own efforts and Kṛṣṇa's strategies, the Pāṇḍavas are victorious after 18 days. On the Kaurava side, little is left but a defeated and dying Duryodhana, and three characters named Aśvatthāman, Kṛtavarman and Kṛpa. Book 10, the *Sauptikaparvan* or "Book of the Sleepers" recounts a vicious night attack on the sleeping Pāṇḍava camp conducted by Aśvatthāman, who seeks revenge for the unjust killing of his father during the battle. Absent from the camp during the nocturnal assault, the five Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa return to find that their entire army has been slaughtered. Book 11, the *Strīparvan* ("Book of the Women") then relates the gruesome and pitiful scene of the following day, when the grieving warriors' widows search through the carnage of the battlefield for the bodies of their husbands, and subsequently cremate the deceased.

The next two books, the *Śāntiparvan* or "Book of Peace" (Book 12) and *Anuśāsanaparvan* or "Book of Instruction" (Book 13) make up a large mass of didactic material constituting approximately 25% of the *Mahābhārata*. Wise old Bhīṣma, the first of the four generals of the Kaurava army, had been defeated but remained alive since the close of Book 6, and has since then been lying on a bed of arrows awaiting an auspicious time to die. Once the war is over, he instructs Yudhiṣṭhira at great length on the complexities of *dharma* or righteousness and law, expostulating in the *Śāntiparvan* principally upon the duties of a king, *āpaddharma* or *ad hoc* law for times of crisis, and *mokṣa* or final emancipation. The *Anuśāsana* extends the instruction into miscellaneous matters, and Bhīṣma finally gives up the ghost at the conclusion of Book 13.

Although Yudhiṣṭhira is now the unquestioned and victorious king, he is nonetheless so grieved at the destruction of the war that he cannot bring himself to take the throne. Book 14, the *Aśvamedhikaparvan* ("Book of the Horse Sacrifice") centers on the elaborate Vedic ritual of the *aśvamedha* or Horse Sacrifice intended to atone for the violence of the battle, ease Yudhiṣṭhira's conscience, and establish his sovereignty once and for all.

Book 15, the *Āśramavāsikaparvan* ("Book of the Dwelling in the Hermitage"), relates the final days of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the Pāṇḍavas' old uncle, and some of the other characters. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and a small group of followers leave the kingdom and retire to a pious life of poverty and contemplation in the forest, but eventually die in a conflagration set off by their own ritual fires. Book 16, the *Mausalaparvan* or "Book of the Clubs," recounts the last days of the Pāṇḍavas' dear friend Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa and his two-fold tribe made up of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas. Fulfilling two curses that have been laid on their head, the entire clan destroys itself in a drunken frenzy with iron clubs. Kṛṣṇa walks away from the melée, lies down under a tree and is fatally shot in the foot by a hunter's arrow.

The two final *parvans*, 17 (the *Mahāprasthānikaparvan* or "Book of the Great Departure") and 18 (*Svargārohaṇaparvan* or "Book of the Ascension to Heaven") are the books with which we are especially concerned in this dissertation. They relate the death and afterlife experience of the five Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī. Renouncing the kingdom once and for all, the group of six set off

on foot to the northern mountains, intending to walk to heaven. All but Yudhiṣṭhira die along the way, while the latter is taken to paradise in his mortal body. There he is enraged to find his enemy Duryodhana enthroned in glory, and subsequently witnesses his wife and brothers suffering in hell. After declaring he would rather remain in the nether regions with his family than enjoy his well-earned heavenly position, the horrific hell scene is dissolved and declared by the gods to have been illusory. Yudhiṣṭhira dives into the Gaṅgā river, renounces his mortal body, and ascends to heaven where he beholds all the principal characters of the epic story in their heavenly stations. The poem then concludes with a block of *phalaśruti* material or verses touting the "fruits of hearing" and reciting the *Mahābhārata*. An important appendix to the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṁśa* or "Lineage of the Lord [Kṛṣṇa]," then follows.

The above summary of the *Mahābhārata*'s massive narrative is of course nothing more than a bare thread of the plot, and cannot hope to do justice to the original. But in one respect especially we must qualify this précis of the poem's story: the narrative is not continuous, but is frequently interrupted as material subsidiary to the thrust of this basic plot is introduced. Indeed, the reason that the *Mahābhārata* is as massive as it is today is because it contains a large amount of material which departs, in varying ways, from the basic story as presented here. To be sure, there are cases in which it is arguable whether or not such material serves the principal narrative development. However, even the most cursory glance at the epic as a whole yields the impression of a narrative which has come to serve as a gathering-place for multiple theological and philosophical voices.

The most obvious example of the suspension of the principal narrative and introduction of other genres are Books 12 and 13, which present a wide range of teachings on philosophical and legal matters over a span of nearly 20,000 verses. Another example is Book 3, which totals over 10,000 verses principally on account of the many teachings and stories told to Yudhiṣṭhira and his family by various sages while they are in exile. Similarly, the *Mahābhārata*'s opening book of over 7,000 verses does not begin to relate the birth stories of the poem's principal characters until after 90 *adhyāyas* or chapters of introductory material, nearly halfway through the book. Thus to present the *Mahābhārata* simply as an epic story of a war between two sets of cousins would be to grossly oversimplify the text, which is heterogeneous in terms of the genres of material included within it, as well as in its style, grammar and formal aspects.

This brings us now to a key issue of scholarship on the text: how should we read the *Mahābhārata*? On the one hand the poem shows clear signs of reworking, interpolation, inconsistency in the style of its language, grammar and syntax, inconsistency in the distribution of locutions and formulaic phrasing,[11] and contains a good deal of near-verbatim and identical material shared with other

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[11] See especially John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Boston: Brill, 1998), 103-116.

legal and theistic texts such as the *Manusmṛti* and various *Purāṇas*.[12] Even the small, self-contained episodes within the text may, upon close examination, betray signs of heavy reworking.[13] The Critical Edition itself attests to the process whereby the poem attracted interpolations from all over the subcontinent as various manuscript traditions preserved the text by recopying generation after generation, each apparently motivated by its own theological and philosophical concerns. In this sense, one might well treat the poem as a kind of encyclopedia, and approach it as one might approach a canon or growing body of scripture, whereby an assumption of heterogeneity and multiplicity in its authorship governs the inquiry.

However, the *Mahābhārata* is also characterized by a strong and coherent narrative, consistency in rendering the well-drawn personalities of its main characters, much structural symmetry and repetition of motifs across all 18 books; the changes of genre and interruptions of the principal narrative are almost always furnished with smooth transitions. As we will see in greater detail below, the entire epic is overarched by two narrative frames which act as a kind of packaging or structuring device that greatly consolidate and pull together the contents of the poem. In this sense, one might just as readily wish to treat the poem as a very large piece of literature, and approach it as one might approach *À la recherche du temps perdu* or other large works of fiction, whereby an assumption of a conscious or deliberate design underlying the entire text, large as it may be, governs the inquiry.

Scholarship on the *Mahābhārata* has grappled for decades with this question of how best to conceive and treat the text. While we cannot hope to review the substantial existing research on the *Mahābhārata* in a comprehensive way, it is crucial that we take note of two tendencies in the approach to the *Mahābhārata* which correspond roughly to the two models presented above. I will characterize these orientations respectively as analytic and synthetic. The former of these tends to emphasize the text's individual portions and heterogeneity, diversity of style and content and gradual growth by accretion over time, while the latter tends to emphasize the text's homogeneity, unifying elements, and stresses a holistic treatment of the poem. These working orientations of course are not "schools" or formally articulated methodological camps, but have nonetheless become more sharply defined in contemporary debate on the epic.

The analytic approach is exemplified in older scholarship principally by Weber, Holtzmann (Sr. and his nephew Holtzmann Jr.), Ludwig, Hopkins,

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[12] See especially E. Washburn Hopkins, "On the Professed Quotations from Manu Found in the Mahābhārata." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 11 (1882-1885): 239-275.

[13] For an exemplary study of this kind, see Heinrich Lüders, "Die Sage von Ṛsyaśṛnga." *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse* (1897): 87-135, and an important follow-up thereto: Ian Proudfoot, "Interpreting Mahābhārata Episodes as Sources for The History of Ideas." *Journal of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 60, part I (1979): 41-63.

Winternitz, and Oldenberg.[14] The work of these scholars was most often directed towards uncovering an *Urtext* or original narrative, which was understood to have become overladen with material usually felt to be of secondary importance. In principle, this type of approach stressed a formal analysis of the text (that is, an examination of meter, language, syntax, and grammar), which allowed the scholar to identify in the *Mahābhārata* the hands of many writers, editors, interpolators and copyists. This type of work made possible inferences about the growth of the text and relative antiquity of text portions one to the other. The epic was thus felt to be best understood as a long-standing textual tradition attracting material into it and inviting various acts of revision, editing, and reworking. Whatever motivations lay behind them, these early analytic treatments of the *Mahābhārata* emphasized a sensitivity to the poem's growth over time and attempted to identify the important changes it had undergone.

In the weaker examples of this type of scholarship we occasionally find an over-zealousness in the application of the labels "genuine" and "spurious," and a tendency to take unsupported liberties in defining between the "real" and "corrupted" text. Perhaps the most extreme case of this is the work of Holtzmann Sr., which culminated in a none-too-convincing attempt to literally rewrite (that is, "reclaim" or reconstitute to its original form) the entire *Mahābhārata* story in German verse, wherein the good and bad camps were inverted, thereby making Duryodhana the hero.[15] On the stronger side of earlier analytic scholarship, however, is E. Washburn Hopkins' *The Great Epic of India*, a masterly work which most often builds its arguments regarding the growth of the poem on the basis of the text's formal aspects, avoiding thereby the danger of identifying certain types of material as earlier or later merely on the basis of their content. Hopkins' work on meter in the *Mahābhārata* has become a standard for the field seldom surpassed,[16] and the book has been continuously reprinted since 1901.

The analytic approach to the text continues in scholarship today, and we might cite in this regard the names of Goldman, Proudfoot, Brockington, Mary Carrol Smith, Schreiner, Grünedahl, Malinar, Oberlies and J.A.B. van Buitenen, among others.[17] These scholars of course each pursue their own particular issues,

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[14] The most important works of these scholars are, in order of publication: Albrecht Friedrich Weber, *Indische Skizzen* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1857); Adolf Holtzmann (Jr.), *Über das Altindische Epos* (Durlach: Gymnasium, 1881); Adolf Holtzmann (Jr.), *Das Mahābhārata und seine Theile* (4 vols. Kiel: C.F. Haeseler, 1892-95); Alfred Ludwig, "Über die mythische Grundlage des Mahābhārata." *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich-Böhmischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* 9 (1895): 1-26; Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India*; Moriz Winternitz, *Geschichte der indischen Literatur* (vol.1. Leipzig: C. F. Amelangs Verlag, 1908); Adolf Holtzmann (Sr.), *Indische Sagen: Übersetzt von Adolf Holtzmann* (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1921); Hermann Oldenberg, *Das Mahabharata: seine Entstehung, sein Inhalt, seine Form* (Göttingen: Vandenhoect and Ruprecht, 1922).

[15] Holtzmann (Sr.), *Indische Sagen*, 3-72.

[16] Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India*, 191-362.

[17] Some key contributions of these scholars to *Mahābhārata* studies are, in order of publication: Robert P. Goldman, *Gods, Priests and Warriors: The Bhṛgus of the Mahābhārata*

but all of them make important contributions to the scholarly tradition of *Mahābhārata* research which seeks to chart the growth of the text and understand the processes of interpolation, accretion, and reworking which have helped to make the epic what it is today.

The synthetic approach to the text also traces back to the early days of *Mahābhārata* scholarship, in particular to the work of Joseph Dahlmann.[18] Dahlmann boldly asserted the unitary origin and authorship of the entire poem, claiming that the text had been written as a form of instructive storytelling. In so doing he accepted, in a very literal way, the aforementioned traditional Hindu classification of the poem as *dharmaśāstra* or systematic work of instruction on law, ethics and social organization. In asserting the unitary nature and authorship of the text, Dahlmann went completely against the grain of the dominant analytic scholarship of his generation. Hopkins thus referred to the synthetic approach as "the Dahlmannian delirament,"[19] while Macdonnell said of *Das Mahābhārata als Epos und Rechtsbuch* that it "is not likely to find any support among scholars."[20] Oldenberg spoke for his generation when he described the unitary approach to the *Mahābhārata* as a "scientific monstrosity" and a waste of time.[21]

Today, however, synthetic readings of the *Mahābhārata* have become more popular, rest on firmer footing than the arguments presented by Dahlmann, and have greatly broadened the scope of concerns with which scholars may approach the text. Three scholars in particular — Georges Dumézil, Madeleine

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(New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Ian Proudfoot, *Ahiṁsā and a Mahāhārata Story: the development of the story of Tulādhāra in the Mahābhārata in connection with non-violence, cow protection and sacrifice* (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1987); Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*; Mary Carroll Smith, *The Warrior Code of India's Sacred Song* (New York: Garland, 1992). The work of Peter Schreiner, Angelika Malinar, Thomas Oberlies and Reinhold Grünedahl are collected in an important work on the *Nārāyaṇīya* portion of Book 12 of the *Mahābhārata*: Peter Schreiner, ed. *Nārāyaṇīya-Studien* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997). J.A.B. van Buitenen, although principally known for his work in translating the first five *parvans* or books of the *Mahābhārata*, embraces and advances the gradual-growth model in the introductory material of his widely-consulted volumes: J.A.B. van Buitenen, ed., trans., *The Mahābhārata* (vols. 1-3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973-1978).

[18] Joseph Dahlmann, *Das Mahābhārata als Epos und Rechtsbuch: Ein Problem aus Altindiens Kultur und Literaturgeschichte* (Berlin: Felix L. Dames, 1895); Joseph Dahlmann, *Genesis des Mahābhārata* (Berlin: Verlag von Felix L. Dames, 1899). A similar position to Dahlmann's was taken in 1939 by Vittore Pisani, who also asserted a unitary authorship of the entire poem, although later on came to embrace a model of longer chronological development: Vittore Pisani, "The Rise of the Mahābhārata," in *A Volume of Eastern and Indian Studies presented to Professor F.W. Thomas*, ed. S.M. Katre and P.K. Gode (Bombay: Karnatak Publishing House, 1939), 166-176.

[19] E. Washburn Hopkins, "The Bhārata and the Great Bhārata." *American Journal of Philology* 19, no.1 (1898): 4.

[20] Arthur Macdonnell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (3rd Indian ed. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972), 288.

[21] Oldenberg, *Das Mahabharata*, 32.

Biardeau and Alf Hiltebeitel — are often cited as the key figures in synthetic treatments of the text today.

In the late 1960's and early 70's Georges Dumézil, inspired in part by the work of Stig Wikander,[22] argued for a reading of the text governed by the structures and themes of Indo-European mythology.[23] Dumézil's structuralist approach introduced to epic scholarship a new frame of reference against which the *Mahābhārata* could be read: as a developed work of mythology, the poem is unified by overarching mythic structures common to all Indo-European myth and folklore, in particular the tri-partate division of society into the domains of the sacerdotal/legislative, military/kingly, and popular/fertile.[24] Taking such mythic structures as a kind of code or logic for unlocking the text, Dumézil departed significantly from the analytic trend in epic scholarship and asserted an integrity for the text that had hitherto been seldom championed.

Madeleine Biardeau, perhaps the most outspoken proponent of the synthetic approach, inherited much of Dumézil's structuralist methods and is arguably the most widely-read French scholar of the *Mahābhārata* today.[25] Whereas Dumézil's mythological frame of reference was Indo-European, hers is squarely based on the *Purāṇa*s, a large body of Hindu mythological literature. By emphasizing, as Dumézil, a logic of mythic structures which are determinative for the meaning of the entire text, Biardeau suggests a unitary authorship for the poem, which she characterizes as a brahminical reply to the "menace of Buddhism."[26]

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[22] Stig Wikander, "Pāndavasagen och Mahābhāratas mythiska förutsättingar." *Religion och Bibel* 6 (1947): 27-39.

[23] Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée; L'Idéologie des Trois Fonctions dans les Épopées des Peuples Indo-Européens* (3 vols., Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1968-1973).

[24] Dumézil applies the tri-partate structure particularly to the five Pāṇḍavas. See *Mythe et Épopée* vol.1, 67-86.

[25] Biardeau's most well-known works are a series of five large essays, now published in two volumes: Madeleine Biardeau, *Études de Mythologie Hindoue I: Cosmogonies Purāṇiques*, (Pondichéry: Publication de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1981); Madeleine Biardeau, *Études de mythologie hindoue II: Bhakti et avatāra*, (Pondichéry: Publication de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1990), and a more recent two-volume abridged translation and exegesis of the poem: Madeleine Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata: Un récit fondateur du brahmanisme et son interprétation*, (2 vols. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002).

[26] Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, 139. Biardeau asserts that the poem is "the unique work of a poet or of a small team of brahmin poets, attached to one or more allied royal courts, but working in strict collaboration. Nonetheless, the hypothesis of the single author remains preferable on account of the strength of the conception of the whole [poem] as it is." ("[Le *Mahābhārta* est] une oeuvre unique d'un poète ou d'une petite équipe de poètes brâhmanes, attachées à une ou des cours royales alliés, mais travaillant en étroite collaboration. L'hypothèse de l'auteur unique reste préférable toutefois à cause de la puissance même de la conception de l'ensemble comme tel.") (*Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, 145-146); Biardeau asserts as the foundation hypothesis of her two volume translation and study of the *Mahābhārata* "a causal relation between the conversion of Aśoka [to Buddhism] and the composition of the *Mahābhārata*" (*Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, 749).

Finally, the synthetic trend in scholarship on the *Mahābhārata* is best represented today by the work of Alf Hiltebeitel.[27] A prolific writer, Hiltebeitel pursued Dumézil and Biardeau's mythic-structuralist reading of the text in his popular 1976 publication, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, particularly emphasizing the motifs of apocalypse and *bhakti* or theistic devotion as the dominant and unifying themes underlying the text. Hiltebeitel has continued to question the working assumptions and conclusions of the more analytically oriented approaches to the text, and proposes, in the vein of Dahlmann and Biardeau, a model of authorship for the poem which challenges the long-term gradual growth model for the poem's origins.[28] His most recent book contribution, *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata: *A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, has been acknowledged as a major contribution to *Mahābhārata* scholarship that advances the case for a holistic reading of the text as a unified work.[29]

There is no question that both the analytic and synthetic orientations towards the text each afford valuable insights into the *Mahābhārata*. Dangerous pitfalls can threaten a handling of the poem that is over-zealous in either direction,

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[27] Some of Hiltebeitel's principal contributions are, in order of publication: Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); Alf Hiltebeitel, "Toward A Coherent Study of Hinduism." *Religious Studies Review* 9, no.3 (July 1983): 206-212. This latter article is a review of 3 works of Madeleine Biardeau strongly advocating her comprehensive treatment of Hindu mythology and structuralist approach; Alf Hiltebeitel, "Epic Studies: Classical Hinduism in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa.*" *Journal of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 74 (1993-94): 1-62. This latter article is principally a review of two books, namely Ruth Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahābhārata: Where Krishna is, there is Victory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) and the first volume of the Princeton University Press translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Robert P. Goldman, trans. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India* (vol.1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadī among Rajputs, Muslims, and Dalits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Alf Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships. Proceedings of the First Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, August 1997*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 155-168. This latter article offers a rejoinder to a long-standing hypothesis on the reworking of the *Mahābhārata* by a group of priests known as the Bhṛgus; Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata: *A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Alf Hiltebeitel, "Not Without Subtales: Telling Laws and Truths in the Sanskrit Epics." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33 (2005): 455-511.

[28] In *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata, Hiltebeitel hypothesizes that the poem was composed by a committee of brahmins, "at most through a couple of generations" (20); Hiltebeitel proposes that this commitee of "*uñchavṛtti*" ("living by gleaning") authors worked together around the period of 150 BCE - 0 CE, and posits a complex and mysterious relationship between them and the figure of Vyāsa, the *Mahābhārata*'s mythic author (Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata, 18-19 and 32-91).

[29] For book reviews of *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata see Hugh M. Flick Jr., *Asian Folklore Studies* 61, no.2 (2001): 341-342; Mary Brockington, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 45, no.4 (Winter 2002): 361-365; Peter Schreiner, *The Journal of Religion* 83, no.2 (April 2003): 332-334; James L. Fitzgerald, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123, no.4 (Oct.-Dec. 2003): 803-818.

however. On the one hand, the work of identifying interpolations and accretions can, if not governed by disciplined philological method, quickly devolve into an arbitrary atomizing of the text and yield a distorted image of the poem as a broken and disorganized patchwork. Circularity in argumentation may afflict an analytic approach to the text which takes as its criteria the text's content and not its form in the process of identifying multiple authorial or editorial layers or strata.[30] On the other hand, an over-zealous holistic approach that too casually connects any two moments or episodes of the enormous poem, no matter how widely separated they are in the text, may always be threatened by the possibility of their having been authored or incorporated into the poem at different times. If one takes the notion of unitary authorship too far, the poem's many inconsistencies in content, genre, style and grammar must be explained as the result of conscious literary design — an exegetical strategy that can also quickly devolve into the assignation of artistic values to elements far better explained by the more parsimonious hypothesis of multiple authorship.

Much moreso today than in Dahlmann's time, then, the contemporary scholar of the *Mahābhārata* is confronted with the task of self-consciously defining his or her basic working orientation towards the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, it is very difficult to conduct research on the epic today in a meaningful way without first defining for oneself some kind of methodological position with respect to the analytic and synthetic treatments of the text. This dissertation is by no means free of such concerns, and so I have spent some time above establishing this important issue of epic scholarship as the background against which the thesis has taken shape. Below I articulate, and support as much as possible in the accompanying notes, the position I take towards the text vis-à-vis these major scholarly trends. To embark upon a full defense and documentation of this position would of course entail more than an entire dissertation itself, and so this declaration must be of necessity something in the manner of a manifesto.

I embrace a conception of the *Mahābhārata* as a text heterogeneous in content and authorship, but consolidated in a comprehensive act of editing which produced a written form of the text by around the 4th or 5th century CE.[31] The present-day Critical Edition of the Bhandarkar Institute represents an approximation of this early written text.[32] This form of the *Mahābhārata* became

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[30] Hiltebeitel's review of Ruth Katz's *Arjuna in the Mahābhārata* is helpful on this point (Hiltebeitel, "Epic Studies.") as is Proudfoot, "Interpreting Mahābhārata Episodes."

[31] See above, note 3 on the dating of the text.

[32] James Fitzgerald refers to this form of the text as the "written archetype," and writes: "The effort to establish a critical edition of the Sanskrit text of the *Mahābhārata* ... revealed that a single Sanskrit version of the "*Mahābhārata*", fixed in writing, was at the base of the entire manuscript tradition of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* ... [The Critical Edition's manuscripts] point conclusively to a single written "text" of a *Mahābhārata* at some point in the ancestry of these manuscripts ... The critical edition of Poona is the closest approximation to the archetype behind the manuscript tradition we will ever get ..." In the accompanying notes, Fitzgerald adds: "The amount of unity, both petty and general, that exists among the *MBh* manuscripts ... can be explained only on the assumption of a fixed text antecedent to those manuscripts, an archetype.

authoritative for later tradition, and as such may be referred to as the "normative redaction."[33] The fixing of the text at this point was not an act of creation *ex nihilo*, but one of redaction: forms of the text had hitherto existed as floating oral compositions,[34] and almost certainly in earlier written forms as well. The heterogeneity of this normative redaction (which, again, is now available to us more or less in the form of the Critical Edition) is borne out in much of the work of analytic scholarship on the basic text of the Critical Edition, and allows us to infer that the process of growth by interpolation and accretion, which we know occurred subsequent to the creation of the normative redaction, likely occurred in some degree prior to the creation of this written archetype as well.[35]

For the variations which exist can be explained as later, particular innovations resulting from various dynamic factors in the tradition, while the unity cannot be explained, generally, as parallel independent invention." Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda," 152-153. On the whole I embrace Fitzgerald's conception of this earliest inferable form of the text, but prefer Bigger's term "normative redaction" (see below) since the term "archetype" may tend to suggest a simple and homogenous text in contradistinction to a later complex and developed one, and this is not the case with the text of the Critical Edition.

[33] I borrow the phrase "normative redaction" from Andreas Bigger, [Andreas Bigger, "The Normative Redaction of the Mahābhārata: Possibilities and Limitations of a Working Hypothesis," in *Stages and Transitions: Temporal and Historical Frameworks in Epic and Purāṇic Literature. Proceedings of the Second Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, August 1999*, ed. Mary Brockington (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2002), 17-31], who articulates a position similar to that expressed by Fitzgerald, but with important qualifications. Bigger characterizes the early written form of the text as the "normative redaction," likening it to "a kind of screen-shot," (20) emphasizing thereby the fluidity of the text both prior and subsequent to the creation of what Fitzgerald refers to as the "written archetype."

[34] That the *Mahābhārata* took its rise initially from ancient oral sources is a hypothesis that has been pursued almost from the beginnings of European scholarship on the text and is still pursued today. The works of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord have been key sources in such research on the *Mahābhārata*: Milman Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making I: Homer and Homeric Style." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41 (1930): 73-147; Milman Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making II: The Homeric Language as the Language of an Oral Poetry." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 43 (1932): 1-50; Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). For more recent scholarship on the oral heritage of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, see John Brockington, "The Textualization of the Sanskrit Epics," in *Textualization of Oral Epics*, ed. Lauri Honko (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 193-215; John Brockington, "Formulæ in the Rāmāyaṇa — An Index of Orality?" in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships. Proceedings of the First Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, August 1997*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 121-130; John D. Smith, "Formulaic Language in the Epics of India," in *The Heroic Process: Proceedings from the International Folk Epic Conference, Dublin, September 1985*, ed. Bo Almqvist, Séamus Ó Catháin and Prádraig Ó Héalaí (Dun Laoghaire: Glendale Press, 1987), 591-611; John D. Smith, "The Singer or the Song? A Reassessment of Lord's 'Oral Theory.'" *Man*, New Series, 12, no.1, (April 1977): 141-153.

[35] Hence Bigger's use of the phrase "screen shot" (see above). Ian Proudfoot frames the issue succinctly: "[I]n the light of the persuasive evidence provided by the compilation of the Poona Critical Edition which irrefutably demonstrates that a great many accretions both extensive

Hence I do not conceive of this early form of the written *Mahābhārata* — the written archetype or normative redaction — as the product of unitary authorship *per se*. That is to say, I do not believe that the material constituting the written archetype came about as an actual literary creation by design of a single writer.[36] But it does seem likely, given the integrated and cohesive nature of the Critical Edition text, that the normative redaction was prepared in writing and organized in quite a comprehensive act of editing and compilation. Hence, whatever the provenance, authorship and age of the materials brought together in the course of this editing, the normative redaction presents them in a continuous and integrated framework that would appear to make of the *Mahābhārata* a self-contained piece of literature. Consequently, the position I take which is definitive for the work of this dissertation is to acknowledge and accommodate a degree of heterogeneity of the poem's materials, while recognizing the important integrating effect of redaction which the written archetype fixed, preserved, and made authoritative for later manuscript traditions of the *Mahābhārata*. Once again, it is on the basis of the present day Critical Edition of the poem that I and other scholars infer the existence and character of such a written archetype or normative redaction, and in this dissertation I will build hypotheses about the normative redaction based principally upon a close reading of the Bhandarkar Critical Edition text.

Above I have made passing reference to some of the elements which bespeak the poem's unity and integrity as a piece of literature: the coherent narrative, consistency in the rendering of the story's characters, structural symmetry and repetition of motifs across the poem. I would argue that such elements provide us with some examples of the normative redactions's cohesiveness — a cohesiveness that, as I have just proposed, is likely attributable to a process of systematic redaction or editing. But in addition, I would argue that the two narrative frames within which the entire *Mahābhārata* story is presented also provide us with an indication of the integrating and consolidating effect of redaction. These frames are established at the very beginning of the poem, are carried through consistently across the entire text, and closed at the epic's termination. Moreover, they point to an aspect of the normative redaction which is central to this dissertation: the structuring effect of Vedic ritual upon the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative.

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and minute have been added to branches of the Mahābhārata tradition subsequent to the time of the archetypal text, it is unreasonable not to accept that there has been accretion anterior to the archetypal text." Proudfoot, "Interpreting Mahābhārata Episodes," 45-46.

[36] As we noted above, Biardeau states that "the hypothesis of the single author remains preferable on account of the strength of the conception of the whole [poem] as it is." (*Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, 145-146). Here it is clear that Biardeau, while also imagining a committee of authors similar to Hiltebeitel, ultimately prefers a hypothesis of unitary authorship which is premised upon a perceived all-embracing design behind the poem. Hiltebeitel, however, does not go so far as to imagine a single author (see above, note 28).

The first of these narrative frames is established as follows: the sage Vyāsa is the creator of the *Mahābhārata*, and he teaches the poem to his five students, one of whom, Vaiśaṁpāyana, recites it on the occasion of a long and elaborate ritual sacrifice commissioned by King Janamejaya called a *sattra* ("sitting" or "sacrificial session" — we will discuss this Vedic rite in detail below in section 2.2.1.). The ritual lasts for several days, and during the pauses between the ceremonial activities, Vaiśaṁpāyana relates to the king the great story composed by his teacher Vyāsa (whose silent presence at the recitation authorizes Vaiśaṁpāyana's rendering of the work). King Janamejaya, who is none other than the great-grandson of Arjuna, one of the story's most important characters, is delighted to hear the many legends of his forefathers. The narration of Vaiśaṁpāyana to the attentive and inquisitive King Janamejaya constitutes the principal narrative framework of the *Mahābhārata*, and the epic constantly reverts from the material of the poem back to the recitation environment as Janamejaya asks Vaiśaṁpāyana for more details or interrupts him with exclamations of wonder and amazement.

Also present as a silent witness at King Janamejaya's sacrifice is a bard named Ugraśravas. He listens carefully to Vaiśaṁpāyana's recitation of the poem, and once the *sattra* sacrifice is brought to a close, wanders off. He soon encounters a group of brahmin priests who are also engaged in a *sattra* sacrifice in Naimiṣa forest. The priests and their leader Śaunaka ask Ugraśravas to recite the great poem that is still fresh in his memory, and he obliges them. This constitutes the second narrative frame of the *Mahābhārata*, which encompasses and brackets the Vaiśaṁpāyana-to-Janamejaya narration. Thus such phrases as "Vaiśaṁpāyana said ...," and all reports on Janamejaya's *sattra* constitute the repeat recitation of Ugraśravas to Śaunaka and his fellow *sattra* priests.[37] All of the many other instances in the poem of one-to-one communication, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* (Kṛṣṇa's conversation with Arjuna in Book 6, which itself is relayed by a character named Saṁjaya to the blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra) or Bhīṣma's long discourse to Yudhiṣthira in Books 12 and 13, make up subsidiary narrative boxes contained within these two frames (see Fig.1 below).

The two outermost narrative frames or contexts of recitation, which are introduced in the poem's very first verses, and in a sense package and present the material of the *Mahābhārata*, are a key aspect of the normative redaction. In fact, I would argue that they can be taken as an important clue to reading the *Mahābhārata*, since they embrace and structure the entire poem from start to

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[37] On the matter of this double frame, Minkowski writes: "[T]he use of a second frame story solves the narrative problem of the first. That is, it answers the simple question: who is telling the story of Vaiśaṁpāyana?—with a simple answer: Ugraśravas. But this seems to be a very dangerous solution, since it must necessarily provoke the same question it is designed to answer, now compounded with the threat of an infinite regression." Christopher Z. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra* and Ritual Structure." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no.3 (1989), 406.

finish. What is of special importance is the fact that both of these narrative frames are rooted in the ritual environment of the *sattra* or "sacrificial session," and are thus intimately connected with the Vedic ritual world. This tells us something about those who consolidated the Mahābhārata story and integrated it within these contexts of recitation: for them, the Vedic world of sacrifice was a dominant concern. That these authors and editors were brahmin males is commonly assumed and highly likely, although in the discussion below I will focus on the text itself and refer to its creators as its "authors and editors," rather than develop a hypothesis on the social identities of these writers and redactors.[38]

Perhaps more than any other scholar, Christopher Minkowski has investigated this relationship between Vedic ritual and the narrative frames making up the *Mahābhārata*'s basic structure. In a 1989 article, Minkowski focused on the contexts of recitation of the text and the phenomenon of "embedding": the boxes-within-boxes pattern that characterizes the epic's
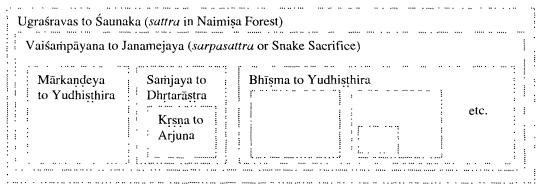
Ugraśravas to Śaunaka (*sattra* in Naimiṣa Forest)

Vaiśaṁpāyana to Janamejaya (*sarpasattra* or Snake Sacrifice)

| Mārkaṇḍeya to Yudhiṣṭhira | Saṁjaya to Dhṛtarāṣṭra | Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira | etc. |

Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna

Fig. 1. Narrative Frames in the *Mahābhārata*

narrative frames is the literary equivalent of the rites-within-rites that make up whole Vedic rituals.[39] Minkowski argues that this Russian-doll configuration is not haphazard but self-conscious, as the language and phrasing which occurs at the transition points between such boxes is consistently formulaic. Hence the association of the *Mahābhārata*'s recitation with Vedic sacrificial institutions is already made within the text itself; moreover, Minkowski points beyond this level to that of the text's narrative structure as well.

In a companion article to this piece, Minkowski points to even deeper links between the *Mahābhārata* and the Vedic traditions of the *sattra*, particularly by means of a complex of snake mythology and motifs which are associated with

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[38] For a more developed hypothesis on the social identities of the *Mahābhārata*'s creators, see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata, 19-20.

[39] Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra* and Ritual Structure."

both the Vedic *sattra* literature and the text of the *Mahābhārata*.[40] Minkowski shows that Janamejaya's snake sacrifice has its source in older Vedic literature and that the link between *sattras*, snakes, and *Mahābhārata* can be traced to literature which almost certainly preceded that of the extant epic itself. In these older accounts we find names of people and places important in the *Mahābhārata*, thus suggesting that those who composed the *Mahābhārata*'s frame story were drawing on pre-existing traditions which themselves already associated certain names and places of the *Mahābhārata* story with snakes and *sattras*. When we recall that beyond Janamejaya's *sattra* is a second re-telling of the tale which takes place at yet another *sattra* in Naimiṣa forest (a place associated with *sattras* in the older Vedic literature), it should become clear that the Vedic institution of the *sattra* is inextricably tied to the *Mahābhārata* as we have it today.

I would suggest, then, that the epic has reached its present form in part through the activity of authors and editors for whom the Vedic universe — its gods, cosmos and rituals — was a key frame of reference and touchstone of meaning. And if, as Minkowski demonstrates, these over-arching frames carry so much of the Vedic world within them, it would seem advisable that we read the *Mahābhārata* with a sensitivity to the themes, motifs and structures of the Vedic world. In the ensuing dissertation I will focus on precisely this Vedic aspect of the poem and argue that in order to fully understand the *Mahābhārata*'s concluding episodes in Books 17 and 18, we must understand these Vedic themes, motifs and structures.

At first glance, such an approach to the text might be discouraged by what appears to be a certain discontinuity between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata*. The considerable difference between the language of the Veda and that of Epic Sanskrit would seem to bespeak such discontinuity, as is occasionally stressed in survey works on Indian literature.[41] Moreover we have already noted above that, according to traditional Hindu typologies of literature, the *Mahābhārata* is a work of *smṛti* or "remembered" scripture in contradistinction to the *śruti* — that is, the four Vedas. Indeed, simply in terms of their content, this distinction would seem justified: the Vedas are a priestly literature, consisting principally of a liturgy for sacrificial rituals, accompanied by elaborations upon the procedures involved, the mythological origins of the rites, and speculation upon their secret meaning and power. The *Mahābhārata*, meanwhile, is very much a *kṣatriya*'s or warrior's poem, centering on a great battle of eighteen armies and abounding in tales of military prowess and valour. Given such discrepancies as these between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata* (and certainly more could be enumerated), one might

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[40] Christopher Z. Minkowski, "Snakes, *Sattras* and the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 384-400.

[41] "In turning from the Vedic to the Sanskrit period, we are confronted with a literature which is essentially different from that of the earlier age in matter, spirit and form. Vedic literature is essentially religious; Sanskrit literature, abundantly developed in every other direction, is profane ... The religion itself which now prevails [in the Epics] is very different from that of the Vedic age ..." Macdonnell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, 279.

assume that the old Vedic world so concerned with elaborate ritual sacrifices would offer little by way of helping us understand the epic war poem.

Beyond the surface appearances, however, lies a rich complex of ritual, philosophical and mythic continuities between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, many scholars to date have investigated the relationship between the *Mahābhārata* and the world of the Veda. We have already made reference to the work of Christopher Minkowski on the Vedic character of the poem's narrative frames; in addition, other scholars have pursued such issues as, among other things, the *Mahābhārata*'s self-proclaimed status as a "Fifth Veda,"[42] the poem's recurring meditations on the analogy between war and ritual sacrifice,[43] the poem's transposition of Vedic myth into the epic narrative,[44] and the links between important geographic sites in the Veda and *Mahābhārata*.[45] Throughout the course of this dissertation, we will have occasion to revisit some of these themes, as well as examine the work of J.A.B. van Buitenen and several others who posit a unique relationship between Vedic ritual and the structure of certain narrative sequences in the *Mahābhārata*. Hence, notwithstanding the prima facie disparity between the worlds of the Veda and the epic, it has been shown in the past that reading the *Mahābhārata* with a sensitivity to the Veda's ritual and mythic themes can yield much to our understanding of the epic poem. Alf Hiltebeitel thus does not exaggerate when he declares that "[t]here is no end to the maze one could trace between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata*..."[46]

The complex relationship between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata* has justly become a key theme of contemporary research on the epic. Nonetheless, I know of no research to date treating this theme in connection with the poem's important concluding episodes. Consequently, two questions presented themselves to me which established the parameters for the work of this dissertation: Can we understand any text without understanding its conclusion? And if reading the *Mahābhārata* with a sensitivity to Vedic themes and motifs has proven fruitful for other portions of the text, might this not also be the case for the

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[42] James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata's* Presentation of Itself," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 150-171. The poem's self-definitions as "Fifth Veda" occur at 1.57.74 and 12.327.18.

[43] Tamar Reich, "Sacrificial Violence and Textual Battles: Inner Textual Interpretation in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*." *History of Religions* 41, no.2 (2001): 142-169.

[44] Wikander, "Pāndavasagen och Mahābhāratas mythiska förutsättingar;" Georges Dumézil, "La transpositions des dieux souverains mineurs en héros dans le *Mahābhārata*." *Indo-Iranian Journal* 3, no.1 (1959): 1-16; Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* vol. 1; Bruce M. Sullivan, *Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa and the Mahābhārata: A New Interpretation* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990); Gösta Johnson, "Varuṇa and Dhrtarāstra." *Indo-Iranian Journal* 9, no.4 (1966): 245-265.

[45] Alf Hiltebeitel, "Conventions of the Naimiṣa Forest." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26 (1998): 161-171 and Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata, 92-176.

[46] Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata, 131. See also Hiltebeitel's notes on this page for further references to works addressing the relationship between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata*. See also Nicholas Sutton, *Religious Doctrines in the* Mahābhārata (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 30-39.

conclusion as well? Whatever the *Mahābhārata* may appear to be on the surface — a work of *smṛti*, a grand tale of war and military bravado, or even a scripture of *bhakti* or religious devotion looking forward to later theistic developments in Hinduism — it is also a text emerging from a rich culture steeped in Vedic values, myth and ritual. I propose here that we cannot fully understand the epic without understanding the way that this Vedic culture has helped to shape the poem, and that the great epic's concluding episodes in particular should invite this type of analysis.

We may return now to the principal concern of this dissertation: through a careful analysis of the epic's two final books, the *Mahāprasthānikaparvan* (17) and the *Svargārohaṇaparvan* (18), I hope to illustrate some of the ways the ritual and mythological culture of the Veda was carried explicitly and implicitly into the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative. I will argue that the motifs and ritual structures of the Vedic world were an important frame of reference for the authors of the poem's conclusion, and that in order to understand why the *Mahābhārata* ends the way it does, we must understand this frame of reference.

This task will begin in chapter 1 with a careful look at the available materials for the ending of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and set the ground for the principal work of the dissertation in chapters 2-4. The dominant concern of chapter 1 is to build arguments championing the integral relationship of Books 17 and 18 to the rest of the preceding epic. In so doing, I anticipate and reply to doubts that these books could be later additions to the text added on with no real relation to the preceding mass of material, for if this were indeed the case, the claims I present subsequently about the relationship of these books to the rest of the poem would be considerably weakened. Hence I will argue in chapter 1 against those who question the authenticity of these books, and demonstrate that the ending of the poem as we find it in the Critical Edition's *parvans* 17 and 18 is in fact an integrated part of the greater text, and constituted the normative redaction's conclusion.

The three principal chapters of the thesis which follow ultimately address two major issues. In both cases, we will see the structures and mythic themes of the Vedic world functioning in different ways. The first issue, dealt with in chapters 2 and 3, is the way in which the principal characters die. I will argue in chapter 2 that Vedic ritual paradigms, in particular a form of *sattra* sacrifice called the *sārasvata yātsattra* ("sacrificial sitting along the Sarasvatī river"), helped to shape the substance and sequence of the two final books which describe the self-imposed death of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī. Chapter 3 pursues this issue further and outlines the way in which this same form of Vedic *sattra* sacrifice had been deployed elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* as a model for representing a newer, post-Vedic religious institution. This institution, namely circumambulatory pilgrimage or *prādakṣiṇyā tīrthayātrā*, also figures in the poem's ending, and I will attempt to show that the family relationship between these two ritual forms as we find them in the *Mahābhārata* helps us to understand why the Pāṇḍavas perform a circumambulation just prior to their deaths. Thus by looking back to the

broader context of the *Mahābhārata*, we will see Vedic ritual again functioning as a reference point for the development of themes and motifs occuring in the poem's final scenes.

The second major issue, dealt with in chapter 4, is what happens to the heroes after they die. Here we will see how the epic's cast of characters, and indeed the entire story of the *Mahābhārata*, is set against a backdrop of Vedic myth which is restated definitively at the conclusion of the poem. As in chapters 2 and 3, understanding what is happening here in the poem's final scenes requires that we appreciate the extent to which the *Mahābhārata* in its present form has been fashioned against the paradigm of Vedic myth. In treating the *Mahāprasthānika-* and *Svargārohaṇa- parvan*s in this manner, I hope to support and advance our understanding of the *Mahābhārata* as a text shaped by authors and editors whose work of writing, consolidating and framing together the story of the great Bhārata war was guided by the image of the Veda and its ritual and mythic world.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0. Introduction

This dissertation turns on the twofold claim that the *Mahābhārata*'s concluding episodes are of special importance for our understanding of the text, and that in order to properly understand this conclusion, we must understand its Vedic character. Two matters of business require our immediate attention, however, and will be taken up in this chapter in order to establish the grounds for the principal arguments offered in chapter 2-4. The first task is to provide a more thorough synopsis of the two books in question — the *Mahāprasthānika-* and *Svargārohaṇa- parvan*s — in sections 1.1.1. and 1.1.2 (these two books are also offered in full translation in Appendix 1). In the course of the summary, I will address some minor issues as they arise in the course of the narrative, while marking the key questions that will constitute the central concerns of the dissertation taken up in chapters 2-4. As such the synopsis will serve as a means of dealing briefly with some curious elements of Books 17 and 18, while providing the narrative context for the major issues treated in the principal thesis chapters.

The second issue is of a more theoretical nature, and seeks to answer several questions touching upon the materials at hand: Do *parvan*s 17 and 18 give us the real ending of the *Mahābhārata*? Are there not other versions of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* with different endings? Or might these two small books simply have been tacked on to the poem as a kind of afterthought? Such questions must certainly be resolved before we begin building arguments about the relationship of these two final books with the rest of the poem. As we will see, some epic scholars have had reservations about the authenticity and antiquity of Books 17 and 18. I will reply to such doubts and argue in section 1.2. that there is no compelling reason to question the antiquity of the of the poem's ending as we find it in the Critical Edition.

1.1.1. Synopsis: The Book of the Great Departure (*Mahāprasthānikaparvan*)

Book 17 opens as Yudhiṣṭhira receives from Arjuna the news of the death of Kṛṣṇa, Baladeva[47] and their clan. The sense of doom and resignation to decay that this news precipitates is already established in Yudhiṣṭhira's mind at the start of the preceding book (*Mausalaparvan*), where the Dharma King had witnessed many bad omens. *Parvan* 16 had told the story of the complete self-destruction of

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[47] For simplicity's sake only the name Baladeva will be used in this dissertation, despite the fact that this character is more often called Rāma in the *Mahābhārata* (an inconvenient name, as it is shared by another important *Mahābhārata* character, Rāma Jāmadagnya); Baladeva is also known in the *Mahābhārata* as Saṁkarṣaṇa, Rauhiṇeya, Halāyudha, Haladhara, and Bala.

the Vṛṣṇis, Andhakas and Bhojas, the death of Kṛṣṇa, and Kṛṣṇa's brother Baladeva. Hence Yudhiṣṭhira sets his mind on *prasthāna* or "setting forth" (exactly what this consists of is discussed below) and declares "time cooks all things," telling Arjuna that it behoves him to understand this. Arjuna concurs with Yudhiṣṭhira, repeating "Time! Time!" Yudhiṣṭhira declares that he is intent on the renunciation of action, and his four brothers also adopt his renunciatory mindset.

So as not to leave the kingdom in disarray, Yudhiṣṭhira makes the following arrangements: Yuyutsu, the only surviving son of Dhṛtarāṣtra by a slave-woman, is first given control over the entire kingdom. However, successors are established at each major capital: Parikṣit in the eastern city of Hāstinapura and Vajra, Kṛṣṇa's great-grandson and last surviving member of the Yadu clan, in the western city of Indraprastha.

Before they can set out, final *śrāddha* rites are performed for the deceased, along with copious gifts to brahmins. Breaking the news to the populace of his intention to set out on the final journey is somewhat difficult, but Yudhiṣṭhira does not heed the protestations of his subjects. Trading in their ornaments for bark-clothes and performing the final renunciatory rite by throwing their domestic fires into the water,[48] the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī prepare to set out. The populace is greatly distressed to see them again in such a state, just as they were after losing everything in the dice match many years ago. They set out in their usual order of birth, with Draupadī last, all of them followed by a dog, and behind them a sad lot of townfolk who, unable to beseech them to stop, eventually turn back to the city. Two women associated with Arjuna, Ulūpī and Citrāṅgadā, now throw in the towel as well, Ulūpī diving into the Gaṅgā while Citrāṅgadā returns to her home town of Maṇipura.[49] And so the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī are off, fasting and concentrated upon *yoga*. A pertinent question is: Where are they going?

We come here to the first of the two major issues of the dissertation, addressed in chapters 2 and 3. This is in fact a knot of several questions: What is the Pāṇḍavas' goal in performing the *mahāprasthāna* or Great Setting-Forth? Where are they are going? Why do they choose this method of ending their earthly days? These problems are taken up in detail in chapters 2 and 3; for the moment, we will address them only to the extent necessary for the present synopsis, and in order to establish the narrative context for the material below.

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[48] The extinguishing of the domestic fires for the *saṁnyāsin* is often understood to symbolize not total extinction but merely the fires' internalization. Kane cites Manusmṛti 6.25, Yājñavalkyasmṛti 3.45 and states: "Ultimately he is to leave the keeping of fires by depositing the sacred fires in his own self according to the rules prescribed (in Vaikhānasa sūtra)." P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra: Ancient and Mediaeval Religious and Civil Law in India.* (2nd ed., vol 2.2. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968), 920. Clearly the Vulgate commentator Nīlakaṇṭha understands the Pāṇḍavas' extinction of the fires in this way: "It should be understood that '*apsu agnīn utsṛjya*' ("having abandoned the fires into the waters") means 'having deposited the fires into the self.'" (*ātmany agnīn samāropyāpsv agnīn utsṛjyeti jñeyam* | 17.1.22).

[49] The city is also called Maṇalūra (1.207.14; 1.209.23).

To the question "Where are they going?" we might initially give the reply: "Nowhere in particular." This response comes from an understanding of the Pāṇḍavas' undertaking based on the title of Book 17 — *mahāprasthān[ik]a*, and from Yudhiṣṭhira's statement at 17.1.2 that he "sets his mind on departure (*prasthāna*)." *Dharmaśāstra* or legal tradition knows the *mahāprasthāna* or "Great Setting-Forth" as an act of ritual suicide, intended not to bring the renunciant to any particular place, but to lead him or her to death through sheer exhaustion.[50] We find in P.V. Kane's treatment of the *vanaprastha* or forest hermit: "Apart from suicide or self-imposed death for the purposes of penance or at holy places the smrtis allowed ... a forest hermit to start on the great journey [*mahāprasthāna*] to meet death and also allowed in certain circumstances death by entering fire, or by drowning or by fasting or by throwing oneself from a precipice even for those who were not hermits."[51] Kane then cites the *Aparārkacandikā*, of Aparārka: "[a householder] suffering from serious illness [who] cannot live, or who is very old, who has no desires left for the pleasures of any of the senses and who has carried out his tasks, may bring about his death at his pleasure by resorting to Mahāprasthāna, by entering a fire or water or by falling from a precipice."[52] Given the title of the *Mahābhārata*'s Book 17 and the detail of Yudhiṣṭhira's "setting his mind on *prasthāna*," we would certainly be warranted in assuming the Pāṇḍavas are actually not going anywhere, but rather are committing just such a *mahāprasthāna* suicide. In fact, no explicit mention is made in the text of any location that is sought except perhaps, generically, "the forest."[53] As such, a generic sense of *vanaprastha* or resorting to a life in the forest also seems to be suggested, although there is no question that full-scale renunciation is what is taking place: they have extinguished their sacrificial fires (the true *vānaprasthin* or forest-dweller, by contrast, brings his fires with him); they have performed a final renunciatory rite, and put on clothes of tree bark.

But although it is not stated explicitly in the text, the Pāṇḍavas do have a specific goal in mind: the door of heaven. We will address this issue at length in chapters 2 and 3; for the moment let it suffice to say that we find here both a sense of suicide through sheer exhaustion as attested in *dharmaśāstra* literature (hence the book's title) and a sense that Yudhiṣṭhira is leading the way to the gate of heaven.[54]

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[50] P.V. Kane places the earliest works of *Dharmaśāstra* prior to the period 600-300BCE, and asserts that they "had attained a position of supreme authority" by the 2nd century BCE (Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol 1, 9).

[51] Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol 2.2, 926.

[52] Ibid, 936.

[53] 17.1.31b; a moment later (17.1.37c), Agni seems to think they are headed for the forest as well.

[54] Nīlakaṇṭha understands the Pāṇḍavas' journey as being made up of both these elements. He specifies that the goal of the *prasthāna* upon which Yudhiṣṭhira sets his mind is heaven (*prasthāne svargaṃ gantuṃ gṛhān niḥsaraṇe* I 17.1.2), but also states, with overtones of the *śāstra* material cited by Kane, that the *Mahāprasthānikaparvan* as a whole "sets out to demonstrate, by means of the conduct of the Pāṇḍavas, that it is permissible to renounce the body

At the beginning of this journey, the group initially proceeds East to the mountains, and they are about to perform a circumambulation of Āryāvarta or North-Central India, when a last bit of unfinished business delays them momentarily. Although they are supposed to have left everything behind, Arjuna has kept hold of his Gāṇḍīva bow, being fond of the jewels embedded in it, as well as his two quivers. These weapons had been offered to him by Agni, the god of fire, on the occasion of the burning of Khāṇḍava forest (1.216.1); Agni himself had received the Gāṇḍīva from Varuṇa.[55] But the Gāṇḍīva and quivers must now return whence they came, and so Agni appears before them in the form of a man asking they be returned, as there is no further need for them. Arjuna obliges by throwing them into the water (whence Varuṇa, the God of Waters, can retrieve them).

Yudhiṣṭhira and his family now circumambulate Āryāvarta or North-Central India, walking in an East-South-West-North pattern until they reach the distant mountain ranges of the Himālayas. This gesture will be examined thoroughly in chapter 3, the principal concern of which is to argue that the tour of the earth or *pradakṣiṇa* is in fact a pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*), or rather that it recalls a similar act of pilgrimage undertaken by the Pāṇḍavas in Book 3 of the *Mahābhārata*. Below we will see that understanding the institutional background of this "sun-wise" or "clock-wise" tour is fundamental to understanding why the Pāṇḍavas perform it immediately prior to their deaths.

The journey into the northern mountains which follows the circumambulation of the earth is difficult and requires all their concentration. Despite this focused concentration, however, they walk quickly up and over the Himālayas and into a desert (whence they see Meru in the distance); there, Draupadī loses concentration, and drops dead.[56] Here begins the demise of the family, mulled over briefly by Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira as each person expires in succession. When Draupadī and the others die, Bhīma is outraged and demands an explanation as to why everyone is collapsing *en route*. Here again we get a sense that their undertaking is not simply a form of suicide by continuous walking. For Bhīma, the goal of their sad outing is not to die in this manner, but rather it would seem they are all trying to get somewhere before perishing. Yudhiṣṭhira is apparently of the same mind, as he promptly provides reasons for the collapse of each respective family member. For Yudhiṣṭhira as well, the death of the

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by means of the great journey, etc., for those who have done all that is incumbent upon them to do, and who are stricken by unbearable distress (*kṛtakṛtyānāṁ duḥsahaduḥkhagrastānāṁ mahāprasthānādinā upāyena dehatyāgo yukta iti pāṇḍavācāreṇa pradarśayan mahāprasthānikaṁ parvārabhate* l)."

[55] 4.38.40: Brahmā had it for 1000 years, Prajāpati for 503, Indra for 85, Soma for 500, Varuṇa for 100, and Arjuna for 65.

[56] Whether Draupadī and the others who die *en route* are still in the desert or actually ascending Mount Meru when they collapse is not indicated in the text. Absent details notwithstanding, the popular image, as attested in illustrations such as those accompanying the Citrashala Vulgate text, is that they are winding up the side of Meru when they die.

individual Pāṇḍavas are failures to achieve an unstated goal, namely the door or gate of heaven high in the mythic realms of the trans-Himālaya mountains — hence Yudhiṣṭhira's pious explanations.

To Bhīma's question as to why Draupadī fell, Yudhiṣṭhira replies that she was guilty of a great partiality for Arjuna — a sin for a woman who was supposed to love all her husbands equally. Meanwhile Sahadeva considered himself peerless in wisdom and his twin brother similarly thought himself peerless in beauty. Arjuna had made martial vows and boasts which he did not live up to, and Bhīma, as Yudhiṣṭhira explains to him as he dies, ate too much (calling him by one of his pet-names, Vṛkodara or "Wolf-Belly" only a moment before, 17.2.17b).

In chapters 2 and 3, we will spend some time developing a hypothesis on the deaths of Draupadī and the four younger Pāṇḍavas, but for the moment I will simply state the following: the family reaches heaven just as surely as Yudhiṣṭhira, although they perish along the way; their elder brother attains heaven, initially in his physical body, and subsequently by drowning himself in the Gaṅgā river. This entire scenario recalls the rite of the *sārasvata yātsattra* or Vedic ritual of the mobile sacrificial session along the Sarasvatī river, which terminates with a ritual drowning suicide or self-imposed death in the head-waters of the river. The ritual texts of the *sārasvata yātsattra* declare that the goal of the rite is heaven itself, but one who perishes before reaching the terminus attains heaven as surely as one reaching the source of the river. This Vedic rite and the closely related institution of circumambulatory pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*) provide the two key frames of reference for understanding the *Mahābhārata*'s construction of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths. Analysis of these ritual traditions and the role they play in the narrative of the epic's conclusion form the heart and substance of chapters 2 and 3 of the dissertation.

For now let us return to Yudhiṣṭhira who, despite all this rather disturbing activity behind him, maintains his concentration, urging Bhīma on even as their family members perish. By the time his human companions have expired, Yudhiṣṭhira becomes aware of a dog that has been following him. As we will soon discover, the dog is in fact the god Dharma (a Vedic personification of the concept *dharma*) in disguise.[57]

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[57] In his introduction to the Critical Edition Book 17, Belvalkar remarks that Yudhiṣṭhira has a "faithful dog, whom also he desired to take with the party" (Belvalkar, CE *Mahābhārata*, vol.19, *parvan* 17, xxv), and in the notes that "[w]e will have to assume that Yudhiṣṭhira had a pet dog who accompanied him on the Mahāprasthāna; but as the great journey was impossible for a mere dog to accomplish on foot, he died on the way—unnoticed by Yudhiṣṭhira—and Yama-dharma entered the dead body and, with a view to put Yudhiṣṭhira to the test, accompanied the party." (Ibid, 22). However, all we know of the dog is that he is there when they leave Hāstinapura (17.1.23b), following behind Draupadī and hence not likely a companion of Yudhiṣṭhira who is leading the group in front. In any case, we can be sure that once his family is deceased, Yudhiṣṭhira is aware of the dog, but oblivious to the animal's true identity.

Suddenly Indra arrives in his chariot, causing a great din, and he invites Yudhiṣṭhira to climb aboard.[58] Finally showing his human side, Yudhiṣṭhira begins to grieve over his fallen wife and brothers and says he does not want to go to heaven without them. But, Indra replies, they have made it to heaven ahead of him by casting off their mortal bodies, whereas Yudhiṣṭhira will certainly make it there in his present mortal body. But he must leave the dog behind in order to do so.

An argument over the dog ensues, in which various claims are made, but which centers on ānṛśaṁsya or non-cruelty. Indra asserts that it is not cruel to abandon the dog, while Yudhiṣṭhira insists that such an act would be difficult to do for a nobleman. But Indra retorts: 'There is no place in heaven for dog-keepers, the Krodhavaśas will destroy their merit. Besides, you have already abandoned your family in the desert, so what's one dog? It's not cruel.' 'But they were dead and this dog is alive,' Yudhiṣṭhira replies, 'to renounce one devoted to me would be a terrible sin.' Finally the argument ends as Dharma resumes his regular form. Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira's divine father, commends his son for his conduct and wisdom in replying dharmically to Indra's arguments, but especially for his compassion for living things. He reminds Yudhiṣṭhira of another such occasion when his knowledge of dharma, wisdom and above all compassion were tested: the Dvaita forest. There (in Book 3 of the Mahābhārata) Yudhiṣṭhira made the decision to revive from death one of the twins instead of choosing Bhīma or Arjuna; this act of non-cruelty had pleased his father, and now again Yudhiṣṭhira has successfully passed the test.[59]

For his act of compassion towards the dog, Dharma declares Yudhiṣṭhira has no equal in heaven. Whereas the reward in the Book 3 test had been to revive all four of his brothers, he is now promised to reach heaven with his current mortal body, and as such will have no equal there. Suddenly the sky is full of heavenly gods and seers, who beseech him to mount the chariot. He does so and upon arrival in heaven, the sage Nārada tells Yudhiṣṭhira that the glory of his arriving in heaven with his mortal body outshines the fame of all other warriors who have ever come to heaven; he knows of none other than Yudhiṣṭhira who has achieved this. But Yudhiṣṭhira, seeming almost to expect already what lies in store, declares that he desires only the world where his family is, whether it be

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[58] Belvalkar mistakenly identifies Indra and Dharma here: "Indra (really, Yamadharma assuming the form of Indra [17.3.16]), comes in his heavenly car..." (parvan 18, xxix). This is no doubt because of his misreading of the term dharmasvarūpī (17.3.16b), which implies that Dharma has resumed his true form not from that of an Indra-disguise, but by casting off his dog-disguise. Dharma and Indra will soon thereafter gang up as a team on Yudhiṣṭhira once again.

[59] Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna are the sons of Kuntī while Nakula and Sahadeva are the sons of Mādrī; as such Bhīma and Arjuna are closer in blood to Yudhiṣṭhira and presumably have a greater claim on his affection. When given the opportunity to revive from death only one of these four, however, he chose Nakula in order that both mothers have one living son each (despite the fact that Mādrī was long dead herself). Dharma, who has caused the deaths of the four brothers, praises Yudhiṣṭhira for this act of compassion (ānṛśaṁsya) and rewards him by returning all four brothers to life (3.297).

good or bad. To this Indra replies: 'Why do you obsess over such mortal affectations?' Like Nārada, Indra remarks that this accomplishment of reaching heaven with his mortal body (itself the consequence of displaying such self-sacrificing *ānṛśaṁsya* for the dog), has never been achieved by anyone. And yet even now Yudhiṣṭhira is moved by such mere-mortal sentiments. Yudhiṣṭhira simply reasserts that he wants to go wherever his brothers and Draupadī are.

Thus ends Book 17, with Yudhiṣṭhira now stripped of his kingdom, worldly possessions, wife, and brothers; he has held onto only his mortal body and convictions about *dharma*, benevolence, and justice.

1.1.2. Synopsis: The Book of the Ascension to Heaven (*Svargārohaṇaparvan*)

Book 18 continues the scene in heaven, where Yudhiṣṭhira sees none other than his enemy Duryodhana enthroned in glory, brilliant as the sun, surrounded by *devas* and other accomplished ones of pure deeds. Yudhiṣṭhira of course is outraged and immediately turns to go. Citing the war and Druapadī's humiliation in the dicing hall as having Duryodhana as their cause, Yudhiṣṭhira bids farewell to heaven — he will not share a place with this criminal.[60] But Nārada explains: 'Such enmity has no place in heaven, and Duryodhana has won heaven through a warrior's self-sacrifice. You should not dwell on past offences; this is heaven!' But Yudhiṣṭhira then asks a question, perhaps more pointed than he knows: 'If this sinner has achieved heaven, where are my brothers? Where is Karṇa and all the valiant warriors of my army?'[61] Rambling on for some verses, Yudhiṣṭhira repeats over and over: 'I want to see them.'

Finally the gods relent and send him, by means of their messenger, to see his family. A horrific description of the hell to which Yudhiṣṭhira is taken then follows. Yudhiṣṭhira asks how much further they have to go on such an awful path, and inquires, perhaps in shock or denial, what region of the gods this is? 'This godless path is yours,' replies the messenger. 'But the gods told me to turn back if you got tired, so let's go.' Yudhiṣṭhira is repulsed and stupefied by the stench, and is just beginning to turn back when suddenly he hears voices cry out right in front of him, although he can see nothing: 'Stop! Stay! Please wait for one moment, for your body bears a pleasant perfume and your presence relieves us while you stand here.' Yudhiṣṭhira stops dead in his tracks: 'Who are you?' The voices belong to Bhīma, Arjuna, the twins, Draupadī, Karṇa, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, and the sons of Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira is suddenly baffled and deliberates whether or not the lot of his family was really fated. Now, unlike in the desert, he declares

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[60] Animosity towards the Kauravas for the physical and verbal abuse inflicted upon Draupadī by Duḥśāsana, Duryodhana and Karṇa at the end of the disastrous dice game in Book 2 are frequently voiced by the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī herself before, during, and even after the war.

[61] Although Karṇa fought on the Kaurava side, his valour and heroism were legendary. Upon discovering after the battle that Karṇa was actually his brother, Yudhiṣṭhira was overcome with grief (11.27.11-20; see also 12.1.19-38).

that he knows no fault of these righteous people — and yet he has just seen the knave Duryodhana in heaven! Although deliberating upon it, Yudhiṣṭhira does not know if he is asleep or awake. Obsessing over the situation and violently manifesting his rage, Yudhiṣṭhira finally condemns the gods and *dharma* itself. He sends away the messenger, telling him to convey his message to the gods that he will remain in hell.[62]

18.3 now begins as the gods, receiving the message of Yudhiṣṭhira's situation, "come there" (*ājagmus tatra*) after a short while, and in so doing they dispel the darkness, leaving nothing of the hell-horrors to be seen, and bringing a fresh smell to the entire area just as Yudhiṣṭhira himself had done just a few moments before. Dharma is there in order to observe (*prasamīkṣitum*) Yudhiṣṭhira, and various other gods and accomplished beings arrive as well. Indra then has some conciliatory words for Yudhiṣṭhira, and a flurry of hasty explanations are then offered to him, first by Indra and then by Dharma, as to why the scene of hell was necessary. Indra offers [1]: hell must be witnessed by every king (this line is repeated verbatim by Dharma at 18.3.35c/d). Indra next claims that [2] everyone has two "heaps" (*rāśi*): one heap of good, the other, bad, deeds. He whose deeds are for the most part impure, experiences heaven first and then must remain in hell afterwards for a long time; he whose deeds are for the most part pure must experience hell first and then may remain in heaven afterwards. "Therefore, you were sent here by me as I desired what is best for you." Although appearing to cite the natural and impersonal operations of *karma*, Indra says here that he himself sent Yudhiṣṭhira.

To complicate things further, this is followed by the statement that [3] it was by fraud that Yudhiṣṭhira deceived Droṇa (*vyājena ... upacīrṇa*), and so now hell has been shown to him by fraud (*vyājena*). Recalled here is the notorious lie told by Yudhiṣṭhira during the great battle to his *guru* Droṇa (7.164.105-106).[63] On the surface there seems to be a straightforward sense of justice here: Just as by trick you deceived Droṇa about his son, so it was by trick that you have witnessed hell. But then he continues: Draupadī and your brothers went to hell by fraud as well (*yathaiva tvaṁ tathā ... [te] vyājena narakaṁ gatāḥ*). Are they suffering from Yudhiṣṭhira's lie as well? The simple retributive justice seems to come apart here. Indra, trying to assure Yudhiṣṭhira they are no longer suffering, adds: they are

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[62] For a stimulating treatment of this curse on *dharma* and the broader theme of Yudhiṣṭhira's three tests, see David Shulman, "The Yakṣa's Question," in *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes*, ed. Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 151-167.

[63] Knowing Droṇa, the general of the Kaurava enemy army, could not be defeated unless he became so disheartened that he would voluntarily put down his weapons, Kṛṣṇa advised Yudhiṣṭhira to tell Droṇa that his son Aśvatthāman had been killed in battle. Although Aśvatthāman was still alive, Bhīma killed an elephant with the same name in order that Yudhiṣṭhira, who never spoke untruth, could say to Droṇa 'Aśvatthāman is dead.' He then did so, mumbling indistinctly (*anyaktam*) "the elephant" so as to soothe his tortured conscience. This act of untruth now comes back to haunt Yudhṣṭhira in the form of a fraud (*vyāja*) or trick played on him, namely the horrific vision of his family in hell.

freed from this fault (*kilbiṣāt* or *kalmaṣāt*, ablative singular in all manuscripts). Which fault? Yudhiṣṭhira's lie?

Suddenly there is a pause in the rambling explanations and, without moving an inch, they seem to be in heaven, or at least have a vision thereof. Yudhiṣṭhira is told to "behold the warriors who fought and died on his side in the war, now in heaven; now that you have experienced this great hardship, henceforth experience the great merits won through your virtuous and ritual conduct, and take up residence in these worlds, equal to Hariścandra himself."

Yudhiṣṭhira's divine father, Dharma, then takes over, calling his son one of great wisdom and dear to him on account of his devotion to *dharma*, truth-speaking, patience and restraint. He continues Indra's explanations of the hell-scene and offers [4]: This was the third test I have put you through, and I see that you cannot be shaken from your natural disposition by means of these reasons (or conditions — *hetubhiḥ*). You always succeed when tested; that you would have remained in hell for the sake of your family constitutes the third success. In fact, your brothers are not actually in hell, but all of this was an illusion created by Indra (18.3.34). Dharma then repeats Indra's claim that all kings must witness hell, and so that is why he had to experience a moment of suffering. Those he had seen there were not deserving of hell "for a long time," (*na ... narakārhāś ciraṁ*) and Draupadī not at all (*na ... narakārhā*).

The statement that the entire scene was illusory (18.3.34c) is surely the only element that renders the substance and meaning of the hell-scene intelligible. If we insist that Yudhiṣṭhira is actually witnessing the real workings-out of *karma*, and being provided a glimpse of things occuring of their own accord, it will be difficult to maintain any sense of order. It is not clear if Draupadī and the others are really in hell, or deserve to be there at all, or if they do merit this fate, whether they are suffering from Yudhiṣṭhira's lie or their own shortcomings. However, if we take as definitive the statement that the entire episode has been nothing more than a test, an illusion designed to elicit a reaction from Yudhiṣṭhira, then the multiple and somewhat inconsistent explanations for the hell scene need not perturb us. Just as the dog was not real, but only a form taken up by Dharma until Yudhiṣṭhira proved he would sacrifice entry to heaven out of compassion for the creature, so also is the illusory vision of hell dispelled once Yudhiṣṭhira firmly refuses to return to his rightful place in heaven so that he may remain in the nether regions to comfort his family. In both cases he exemplifies self-sacrificing *ānṛśaṁsya* or benevolence and is rewarded for doing so. Consequently, we find no clear sense that hell for Yudhiṣṭhira is a real, physical place: the surroundings simply disappear when the gods "arrive" and heaven becomes visible or proximate. Indeed, the principal explanation for the vision is that Yudhiṣṭhira is experiencing the trial "by fraud" (*vyājena*) in retribution for his fraudulent

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statement to Droṇa. Draupadī and the others are not actually suffering, but it is a punishing nightmare for Yudhiṣṭhira to believe that they are.[64]

Once Yudhiṣṭhira has passed this third test, he is praised at length and is invited to dive into the holy Gaṅgā so as to be rid of his physical body and the mortal nature or sentiment which had caused such inappropriate outrage in heaven. We will spend a fair amount of time below articulating the significance of this method of casting off the body, and the connection between Yudhiṣṭhira's final mortal act and the deaths of his wife and brothers. As in the case of death by *mahāprasthāna*, there is a basic surface sense of what is happening here: self-imposed death by drowning occurs in various times and places in the *Mahābhārata*;[65] but beyond this surface reading, we will pursue, in chapters 2 and 3, the Vedic and post-Vedic ritual background to this gesture of drowning in a sacred river.

18.4 then describes the people whom Yudhiṣṭhira sees upon arriving in heaven. First encountered is Kṛṣṇa, endowed with a holy body made known by a likeness to his form previously seen.[66] Among the others whom Yudhiṣṭhira sees

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[64] The fundamental unreality of the entire scene, and its immediate connection to the lie to Droṇa, are asserted by the commentator Vādirāja (published in Belvalkar's critical notes, Critical Edition *Mahābhārata*, vol.19, *parvan* 17, 21-22 and *parvan* 18, 37-38). Vādirāja (whom we can safely place in the 17th century at the latest) writes: "Hell is fashioned right then and there (*tadaiva*) for the sake of showing hell at a suitable moment for Yudhiṣṭhira, since he had, not trusting in Kṛṣṇa's command to say 'Aśvatthāmā is dead,' spoken 'elephant' quickly thereafter (*aśvatthāmu hata iti vadeti kṛṣṇavacanam aviśvasya upāśa kuñjaraś ceti kathanāt tatkālocita-narakadarśanāya devais tadaiva kalpito narakaḥ* l)." Vādirāja also sees the statement at 17.3.5, wherein Yudhiṣṭhira is assured that his brothers have proceeded ahead of him to heaven, to be proof that the hell scene must be artificial (*kalpita*), otherwise Indra's earlier claim would be contradicted (*prāguktaśakravacana-virodhāt*). In fact, the voices that Yudhiṣṭhira hears in hell are "artificial souls" according to Vādirāja (*jīvaḥ ... kalpitāḥ*), created by the gods for the express purpose of giving Yudhiṣṭhira an appropriately miserable hell-experience (*bhīmo'haṁ karṇo'haṁ arjuno'ham ityādi vadanto'pi jīvā dharmarājasya narakayogyaduḥkhadānāya devais tadaiva kalpitāḥ* l). And, Vādirāja adds, how could Yudhiṣṭhira see hell on his way to heaven, since hell is below the earth and heaven above? (*anyathā bhūmer adhastād vidyamānasya narakasya kathaṁ svargamārge darśanam* l). Finally, were this hell real, argues Vādirāja, there would be a contradiction in the text in the following verses where it will be stated that the darkness was dispersed when the gods arrived (*samāgateṣu deveṣu vyagamat tat tamo nṛpa ity ādivakṣyamāṇavacanavirodhāc ca* l).

[65] The widows of the slain warriors drown themselves in the Gaṅgā and ascend to heaven in order to rejoin their husbands there (15.41.19-23). A similar fate is defined for the 16,000 women of Kṛṣṇa's harem, who also drown themselves and ascend to heaven, regaining their forms as Apsarases; in this case they dive into the Sarasvatī river (18.5.21).

[66] Here Biardeau claims that this is the Viśvarūpa form revealed to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā* 11: "It consists of the divine form of Kṛṣṇa usually called Viśvarūpa, which Arjuna had requested him to assume in *Bhagavad Gītā* 11. But here it seems Yudhiṣṭhira had had access to this vision as well, which is not elsewhere indicated" (Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, vol. 2, 739, note 6). That it was indeed only Arjuna who witnessed it and not Yudhiṣṭhira, as she admits, makes her claim unlikely. However there does seem to be an intention on the part of the author to indicate that Kṛṣṇa is not simply in his regular human body, but recognizable by a divine one similar to that with which Yudhiṣṭhira is familiar. As Kṛṣṇa is the first to be seen, perhaps there is

are Arjuna, Karṇa, Bhīma, the twins, and Draupadī. As soon as he sees her, he wants to ask her something, but before he can ask her, Indra says: 'This is Śrī, who had become human as Draupadī for your sake, born in Drupada's family of no mother, fashioned by Śiva for your pleasure'. Indra then takes over, pointing out various people to Yudhiṣṭhira: the five sons of Draupadī, Amitaujas, Karṇa (again), warriors of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas, Bhoja warriors, heroes such as Sātyaki, Abhimanyu, Yudhiṣṭhira's earthly father Pāṇḍu, Kuntī, Mādrī, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and other warriors who, being pure in speech, mind and deed, have reached heaven by abandoning their bodies.

The *Mahābhārata*'s final *adhyāya* or chapter (18.5) begins with a short exchange between Janamejaya and Vaiśaṁpāyana. Janamejaya wants to know what happened to all these people whom Yudhiṣṭhira had seen in *adhyāya* 4 once their good deeds or merit (by means of which they were enjoying heaven), expired. By way of reply, Vaiśaṁpāyana offers a list of names, many of them repeated from the preceeding *adhyāya*, detailing how they all returned to or were reabsorbed into various divine beings in heaven. These *devas* and other supernatural creatures are beings from whom the characters of the epic had been born as portion-descendants long ago at the very beginning of the *Mahābhārata* story. Now returned to heaven, they each regain their respective stations and identities. Whereas in *adhyāya* 4, Yudhiṣṭhira beholds his fellow residents of *svarga* as they enjoy the fruit of their good deeds, *adhyāya* 5 describes their ultimate fates following this enjoyment of merit, namely the mass reabsorption of all characters to the divine beings and *devas* of whom they had been portion descendants as described at the *Mahābhārata*'s beginning (1.59-61).

Here we encounter the second major issue of the dissertation, addressed in chapter 4. Once again, the question opens up a set of interrelated issues: What is the final fate of the epic's characters? Why are they reabsorbed into divine forms and not reborn? Why don't the notions of *karma* and rebirth play a bigger role in the determination of the Pāṇḍavas' post-death fates? And, as in chapters 2 and 3, behind these questions lies a concern of a different order: Why is the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion constructed in this manner? This issue is taken up in detail in chapter 4.

Once the characters have returned thus to the *devas* from whom they descended, Vaiśaṁpāyana closes his narration. The snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya, which provided the ritual context for the narration of the story of the great Bhārata war, is concluded, and the outer narrative frame made up of Ugraśravas' recitation to Śaunaka closes at 18.5.30. The *Mahābhārata* then winds up with a final 34 *phalaśruti* verses or lines of praise for the text and the splendid benefits that accrue from reciting and hearing it.

The preceding synopsis is intended to provide a shorter and more accessible text of the poem's ending than the simple translation of the two books

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a sense that this is the case for everyone whom Yudhiṣṭhira sees in heaven, as they all have exchanged (as he himself has just done) their mortal forms for divine ones.

provided in Appendix 1. In the course of this summary, I have provided
occasional comments on some minor issues I feel are in need of clarification, and
identified the two principal areas of concern of the dissertation: the manner in
which the Pāṇḍavas die and the subsequent return of each character to his or her
respective parent-divinity. Now that the narrative context for these two issues has
been provided, we must occupy ourselves, for the remainder of this chapter, with
a simple question: Is this the "real ending" of the *Mahābhārata*?

1.2.1. Scholarly Doubts on the Date of Books 17 & 18

Is it possible that Books 17 and 18 were late additions to an existing, shorter text
having some other conclusion? Is there any evidence of a version of the Sanskrit
Mahābhārata having some other ending? Here in section 1.2.1, I will reply to
these questions and engage some scholarly doubts about the authenticity of
parvans 17 and 18 as the poem's ending. Subsequently I will offer, in sections
1.2.2-4, positive evidence that the rendering of the poem's conclusion as we have
it today in the Critical Edition text provides us with the oldest available — and for
all intents and purposes, the only — ending to the epic available in Sanskrit
tradition.

From the earliest days of epic scholarship until today, doubts have been
raised about the location of the epic's "real ending" and the "authenticity" (a
somewhat problematic term, usually entailing a claim to antiquity equivalent to
portions of the text already established, by better or worse methods, as ancient or
"genuine") of the *Mahābhārata*'s ending as presented in Books 17 and 18.
Winternitz, for example, stated of the mass funeral following the battle (an event
taking place in Book 11 of the Critical Edition) that "this is probably the point at
which the old poem ended."[67] A scholar with similar leanings, Adolf Holztmann
(Jr.), attributed the epic's final five books to a "second reworking," while
recognizing all the while that they contained "older material," which he thought
must have been re-inserted after the second reworking.[68] Meanwhile Holtzmann's
uncle of the same name proposed, as we noted above, to have reconstructed the
original *Mahābhārata* poem and presented it anew in his own German verse.[69] His
version took great liberties with the story, inverting the good and bad camps in the
war by making Duryodhana and the Kauravas the epic's heroes, and the Pāṇḍavas
their evil enemies. Holtzmann's epic ends with Duryodhana receiving the news

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[67] Moriz Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, trans. Silavati Ketkar (New York: Russell and Russell, 1971), vol.1, 372.

[68] "[The last five books] belong to the second reworking; once Yudhiṣṭhira, his brothers and Draupadī had lived through the great war, their later deeds and deaths also had to be related. Yet here as well some older pieces are transplanted or inserted, such as the *Anugītā*." Holtzmann (Jr.), *Das* Mahābhārata *und seine Theile*, vol.1, 189.

[69] Holtzmann (Sr.), *Indische Sagen*, 3-72 ("Die Kuruinge: Ein Heldengedicht"). See also Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, vol.1, 327-328.

from Aśvatthāman that the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa have been slain in their sleep on the night after the last day of battle. As such he rejects all the material subsequent to Book 10 of the extant *Mahābhārata*.[70] This tendency to dismiss the post-battle material is further exemplified in an old selection of *Mahābhārata* verses in English, which confidently declares:

> "The real Epic ends with the war and with the funerals of the deceased warriors ... and Yudhishthir's Horse-Sacrifice is rather a crowning ornament than a part of the solid edifice. What follows the sacrifice is in no sense a part of the real Epic; it consists merely of concluding personal narratives of the heroes who have figured in the poem."[71]

For the most part such claims tend to operate on the assumption that the epic originally consisted simply of an account of the great war, and tend to dismiss the post-battle material as inauthentic or not part of the "real epic." As the *Mahābhārata* continues on for nine more books after the principal account of the battle, this would certainly not seem to represent a balanced evaluation of the text in its present form.

There is, however, some stronger evidence which might suggest the existence of a *Mahābhārata* terminating with the *Mausalaparvan* or Book 16. In 1898, E. Washburn Hopkins pointed out that one of the opening lists of contents found in the (Bombay) Vulgate *Mahābhārata* does not mention the *Anuśāsana*, *Mahāprasthānika* or *Svargārohaṇa parvans*, but extends only so far as the *Mausala* or Book 16.[72] This passage (Vulgate 1.1.88-92) is in the Critical Edition relegated to the appendix, although it is attested in many manuscripts.[73] The verses, which take up the simile of a tree for the text (*bhāratadruma*), read:

> This tree of the *Bhārata*, like an inexhaustible rain cloud to all creatures, will be the life's source in the mouths of all poets. [Of this tree of the *Bhārata*] the summary of *adhyāyas* is the seed, the [portions called] Pauloma and Āstīka are the root, the Saṁbhava is its trunk and branch, the Sabhā and Āraṇya are the highest point, the book of the Araṇi a portion rich in form, the Virāṭa and Udyoga the sap, the book of Bhīṣma its greatest branch, the book of Droṇa its foliage. Accompanying are the flowers which are the collection of the book of Karṇa, of which the perfume is the book of Śalya. The books of Strī

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[70] *Holtzmann (Sr.), Indische Sagen*, 72.

[71] Romesh Chunder Dutt, trans. *Maha-Bharata: Epic of the Bharatas*. (London: Ballantyne, 1898), 367.

[72] Hopkins, "The Bhārata and the Great Bhārata," 5.

[73] Book 1 appendix, * passage #1, lines 47-56: D6.8 T2 G3-6 M (M1 om. lines 1-56) ins. after 62; D14 G1.2, after 26: K4 (suppl.fol.).6 Dn Dr D2.4.5, after 53ab; D3.7.9-12, after 60: T1 G7, after 30*: K5, after 62ab.

and Aiṣīka are a resting place, the book of Śānti, the great fruit [of the tree of the *Bhārata*]. [Of this tree] the immortal flavour is the [book of] Aśvamedha, the Āśramasthāna its refuge, its book of Mausala a summation of the Vedas, honored by the twice-born and the erudite.[74]

Hopkins claims that this is "a list of the books of the Mahābhārata which omits entirely the thirteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth books of the present text, Anuçāsana, Prasthāna and Svarga. The reasons can be only that when this list was made these books, like the Harivaṅça, were not parts of the epic."[75] If we measure this list of 19 sections against the contents of the epic as traditionally understood (and attested by many other sources), we find the following correspondences:

Vulgate 1.1.88-92 list	Conventional 18 Books of *Mahābhārata*
	1. Ādiparvan (containing, among other things, the
summary of *adhyāyas*	summary of *adhyāyas*
Pauloma	Pauloma episode
Āstīka	Āstīka episode
Saṁbhava	Saṁbhava episode)
Sabhā	2. Sabhāparvan
Āraṇya	3. Vana- or Āraṇyaparvan (containing, among other things, the
Araṇi	Araṇi episode)
Virāṭa	4. Virāṭaparvan
Udyoga	5. Udyogaparvan
Bhīṣma	6. Bhīṣmaparvan
Droṇa	7. Droṇaparvan
Karṇa	8. Karṇaparvan
Śayla	9. Śalyaparvan
Strī	10. Sauptikaparvan (containing, among other things, the
Aiṣīka	Aiṣīka episode)
	11. Strīparvan
Śānti	12. Śāntiparvan
* not mentioned	13. Anuśāsanaparvan
Aśvamedha	14. Aśvamedhikaparvan
Āśramasthāna	15. Āśramavāsikaparvan
Mausala	16. Mausalaparvan
* not mentioned	17. Mahāprasthānikaparvan
* not mentioned	18. Svargārohaṇaparvan

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[74] *saṁgrahādhyāyabījo vai paulomāstīkamūlavān | saṁbhavaskandhavistāraḥ sabhāraṇyaviṭaṅkavān | araṇīparvarūpādhyo virāṭodyogasāravān | bhīṣmaparvamahāśakho droṇaparvapalāśavān | karṇaparvacitaiḥ puṣpaiḥ śalyaparvasugandhibhiḥ | strīparvaiṣīkaviśrāmaḥ śāntiparvabṛhatphalaḥ | aśvamedhāmṛtarasas tv āśramasthānasaṁśrayaḥ | mausalaśrutisaṁkṣepaḥ śiṣṭadvijaniṣevitaḥ | sarveṣāṁ kavimukhyānām upajīvyo bhaviṣyati | parjanya iva bhūtānām akṣayo bhāratadrumaḥ |*

[75] Hopkins, "The Bhārata and the Great Bhārata," 5.

The Vulgate 1.1.88-92 list matches the general outline of the text as we have it today, and the absence of the Anuśāsana (13), Great Departure (17) and Ascension to Heaven (18) from it is indeed worth noting. Hopkins suggests, on the basis of the evidence provided by the Vulgate 1.1.88-92 list, that there existed an older form of the *Mahābhārata* which resembled the text of today, only lacking Books 13, 17 and 18; by extension the *Mausalaparvan* was the original ending of the poem. This, however, is problematic for several reasons.

First and foremost, the *Mahābhārata* as critically constituted provides an *anukramaṇī* or list of contents (1.2.34-69) and *parvasaṁgraha* or summary of the books (1.2.71-234), both of which include the Anuśāsana, Mahāprasthāna and Svargārohaṇa *parvans*. While the tree analogy (*bhāratadruma*) occuring at 1.1.88-92 is not attested in all manuscripts, (and hence the passage is relegated to Book one's appendix, 1*, lines 47-56 in the Critical Edition),[76] the Critical Edition's *anukramaṇī* and *parvasaṁgraha*, which do acknowledge Books 13, 17 and 18, are attested in all manuscripts. While the *bhāratadruma* is an interesting passage that should not be dismissed altogether, it would not make sense to privilege it over that of the Critical Edition's readings at 1.2.34-69 and 1.2.71-234, which are based on a consensus of manuscripts.

Secondly, the "list" at Vulgate 1.1.88-92 is not a proper list of contents in the manner of the Critical Edition's *anukramaṇī* and *parvasaṁgraha*, but merely a brief poetic metaphor for the text. That the actual contents of the epic story are subordinated to the poetic trope is indicated by the displacement of the *Strīparvan* or book of the women's mourning such that it precedes the *Aiṣīka* or episode of the grass arrows, in the compound "*strīparvaiṣīkaviśrāmaḥ*." Strictly speaking, this does not make much chronological sense, since the *Aiṣīka* episode is the last battle of the war and the *Strīparvan* is the book featuring the post-war grief of the widows of all the slain warriors. But the sequence is simply dictated by the meter: the compound *aiṣīkastrīparvaviśrāmaḥ* would violate the *pada* with an extra syllable. Clearly this is not intended to be a reliable list of contents but merely a short poetic image of the *Mahābhārata*, and we should therefore not grant too much weight to the verse in evaluating the actual contents of the text.

A similar case arises when we consult the Spitzer manuscript, dated roughly to the 2nd - 3rd century CE.[77] There the *Mahābhārata*'s contents are listed, according to Schlingloff's reconstruction, as [*ā*](*diparrvaṁ*), (*pau*)*lomaṁ*, *āraṇyakam*, [*ā*](*raṇeyaṁ*), (*ni*)*rryāṇaṁ*, *bhaga*(*vad*)*yānaṁ*, *bhīṣmaparrvaṁ*, (*śā*)*nt*(*i*)*parrvaṁ*, *āśvamedhikaṁ*, and *khileṣu* (appendices).[78] All of these section names correspond to either one of the 18 major *parvans* or one of the 100 minor

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[76] On the so-called "asterix passages," see below, note 88.

[77] See Dieter Schlingloff, "The Oldest Extant Parvan-List of the *Mahābhārata*." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89, no.2 (1969): 334-338; Eli Franco, "The Oldest Philosophical Manuscript in Sanskrit." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 31, nos.1-3 (2003): 21-31; Eli Franco, *The Spitzer Manuscript: The Oldest Philosophical Manuscript in Sanskrit* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004).

[78] Schlingloff, "The Oldest Extant Parvan-List of the *Mahābhārata*," 336-337.

parvans into which the poem is divided by later taxonomies. Absent is any reference to the *Sabhā-, Droṇa-, Karṇa-, Sauptika-, Strī-, Anuśāsana-, Āśramavāsika-, Mausala-, Mahāprasthāna-,* or *Svargārohaṇa- parvans.* Schlingloff therefore states that "...the parvan-list of Ms.Spitzer originated at a time, when the Mahābhārata was still in a state of development..."[79] Franco also states of this list that it "... testifies to an earlier stage of compilation of the epic than the one known to us today..."[80] Unfortunately the Spitzer manuscript is a fragmented and badly damaged source, as is clear from the extent of Schlingloff's reconstruction of the passage in question, and the contents and extent of any of these sections, even if Schlinghoff's inferences are correct, would be entirely open to speculation, particularly the appendices: does appendix mean *Harivaṁśa,* the *Bhavisyapurāṇa,* Books 15-18, or something else?

Here again, fairly meager evidence is seized upon as proof of the existence of a form of the text lacking in certain portions known today. While there is no question that the *Mahābhārata* has undergone some growth over time, and that certain portions of the epic as we now have it may be identified as earlier than others, both Hopkins and Schlingloff rely on quite thin evidence in order to support the formula: contemporary epic minus parts A, B, etc. = older (and implicitly, more genuine) form of the *Mahābhārata.* I would argue the *bhāratadruma* and Spitzer manuscript are simply not enough to compel us to label as "late additions" those portions of the epic which go unnamed in them.

The tendency to second-guess the location of the *Mahābhārata*'s "real ending" persists into contemporary scholarship as well. In his 1998 work on the Sanskrit epics, John Brockington has also suggested that Books 17 and 18 are later additions:

> The remaining three books [16, 17 and 18] are all generally regarded as being late and in any case are extremely short, all containing less than ten *adhyāyas*; indeed, it is most likely that they have been treated as separate books only at a very late date, in order to produce the significant number 18 for the total of the books. The *Mausalaparvan* in some ways anticipates the *Harivaṁśa* in its focus on Kṛṣṇa and the Yādavas. The *Mahāprasthānikaparvan* cannot really be separated from the final book, the *Svargārohaṇaparvan*, in terms of its narrative; the dating suggested by Darmester that was noted above is if anything too early.[81] The *Svargārohaṇaparvan*, as noted in relation to the *Ādiparvan*, deliberately repeats in its final *adhyāya* several verses from 1.56 to provide a balance to the opening of the epic, revealing that it is

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[79] Ibid, 335.

[80] Franco, "The Oldest Philosophical Manuscript in Sanskrit," 23.

[81] On p.130 Brockington refers to J. Darmester, "Points de Contact entre le Mahâbhârata et le Shah-Nâmah." *Journal Asiatique* 10 (1887): 38-75, wherein Darmester speculates that the *Mahābhārata* was borrowed from the Shahnama, which he dates to the Kuṣāṇa period (cir.1st century BCE- 230 CE). However this Persian epic, ascribed to the poet Firdausi, is now dated to cir. 1010 CE.

among the latest passages in the whole work. Equally, the portrayal of
Yudhiṣṭhira in this book turns him even more into an embodiment of
brahmanical Hinduism by emphasizing the questioning philosopher —
the brāhman influence by now extending to the narrative element.[82]

To Brockington's claim that the *Mahābhārata*'s concluding books are
short, intentionally divided so as to reach the number 18, and that Books 17 and
18 form a unit (as do Books 6-9 or 12-13), I heartily agree, but we need not read
such characteristics as tokens of "lateness." Brockington is perhaps suggesting
that the material content had existed for some time as a unit but was later on
broken down in order to create a total of 18 books. This may very well have been
the case, but would not necessarily warrant the assumption that the material itself
is late. As to the possible significance of the number 18 itself van Buitenen
speculates that the number of armies participating in the great *Mahābhārata* battle
(i.e. 18) may have provided the initial base for this recurring numerical trope in
the *Mahābhārata* and later Purāṇic tradition.[83] Following this hypothesis, the
division of the *Mahābhārata* into 18 books need by no means be a late act of
redaction, but rather inspired from within as it were, by a significant numerical
figure of its own content. The idea that the *Mahābhārata* takes its cue from the
Purāṇas for its book number — implied by Brockington and asserted outright by
Holtzmann (Jr.)[84] — is neither convincing on its own, nor persuasive evidence
regarding the date of the final books.

Let us also consider Brockington's claim that Book 18 "deliberately
repeats in its final *adhyāya* several verses from 1.56 to provide a balance to the
opening of the epic, revealing that it is among the latest passages in the whole
work." The verses in question are 1.56.12-33, which indeed correspond to verses
18.5.30-54, in particular the well-known verse "*dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe
ca bharatarṣabha | yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit ||*" ("Whatever
is here pertaining to *dharma, artha, kāma* and *mokṣa*, that is found elsewhere;
what is not here is nowhere else, O bull of the Bharatas," 18.5.38). Other verses
such as 1.56.30 and 18.5.37 are more or less the same and on the whole both
passages are consistent in the kinds of benefits they claim can be derived from
hearing the *Mahābhārata* [a king desiring victory will attain victory (*jaya*) since
the text is also called "The *Jaya*;" one who recites even a little at a *śrāddha* rite
will ensure eternal food for his ancestors, etc.]. Such verses of praise for the text
occur elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, and are of course common in Indian
literature in general, as anyone who has read Buddhist *Mahāyāna sūtras* knows.

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[82] Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 153-155.

[83] van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 3, 141-142. See also Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India*, 371.

[84] "The number 18 seems to have been chosen in reference to the number of Purāṇas or from the fact that the great war of the *Bhāratas* lasted 18 days." Holtzmann (Jr.), *Das* Mahābhārata *und seine Theile*, vol. 2, 1.

But is this particular symmetry between the *Mahābhārata*'s opening and closing verses an indication that *parvans* 17 and 18 are late additions to a pre-existing text already including the 1.56 verses? This would seem to be the purpose of Brockington's mentioning them.

Although I do not contest that *phalaśruti* verses (i.e. verses of self-praise which enumerate the benefits of reciting and hearing the text) are final editorial comments on a pre-existing text, we must distinguish between baby and bathwater. The presence of *phalaśruti* verses at the end of the epic is to be expected, but we should not therefore suspect that the entire final book was authored simultaneously with the *phalaśruti* verses, as Brockington seems to suggest. The occurence of verses of self-praise in the *Svargārohaṇaparvan* does not tell us a great deal about the date of the narrative material which precedes them.

Finally, Brockington asserts that "the portrayal of Yudhiṣthira in [Book 18] turns him even more into an embodiment of brahmanical Hinduism by emphasizing the questioning philosopher — the brāhman influence by now extending to the narrative element." Behind this claim is the notion, indeed not an unreasonable one, that the *Mahābhārata* was reworked by priestly hands. While I embrace such a characterization of the text's growth — it is in fact quite consistent with the claims of this dissertation regarding the importance of Vedic myth and ritual for the normative redaction — the fact is that Yudhiṣthira is quite priestly and brahminical in every book of the poem. Whether or not it is attributable to later priestly interests, Yudhiṣthira's brahminical or *dharma*-philosophical character in Books 17 and 18 is entirely consistent with his behavior in the preceeding *parvans*, and hence his personality traits offer nothing of value regarding the date of Books 17 and 18 vis-à-vis the preceding material of the poem.

What Brockington has suggested here is in harmony with the long-standing tendencies in *Mahābhārata* scholarship exemplified above — a tendency to assume that the concluding books of the *Mahābhārata* as we have it today do not represent the "real" ending to the story, that the battle's conclusion must have constituted the actual termination of the original story, and that everything else is at best of secondary importance. Another contemporary scholar tending to echo this attitude towards the post-battle books is Kevin McGrath: "The Strī *parvan* closes the narrative that commenced with the gambling in the *sabhā;* in effect, this is the end of epic *Mahābhārata...* [t]hese concluding books do not add to the epic matter except in very small part."[85] Here once again, the assumed centrality of the war results in a de-emphasis on the material following the battle, in much the same way that Winternitz saw the post-battle funeral as "the point at which the old poem ended."[86]

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[85] Kevin McGrath, *The Sanskrit Hero: Karṇa in Epic Mahābhārata* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 223 and note no. 39.
[86] Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, vol.1, 372.

1.2.2. Published Editions of the *Mahābhārata*'s Ending

Thus far we have argued against claims and assumptions that explicitly or
implicitly cast doubt on the authenticity of the poem's ending as we find it in
Books 17 and 18 of the Critical Edition today. If these two books are indeed late
additions to a shorter, pre-existing form of the *Mahābhārata* text having some
other ending, convincing evidence for this has yet to be presented in scholarship.
But if any lingering doubts on this matter remain, they can, I propose, be dispelled
by consulting all the principal published materials of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*
— that is to say, editions published prior to the Critical Edition, the Critical
Edition itself, and the contents of the Critical Edition's critical apparatus and
appendices for *parvan*s 17 and 18. I have found no evidence of any competing or
significantly differing rendering of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion in any of these
materials, but have rather found them to be essentially unanimous in their
rendering of Books 17 and 18 except in matters of small detail. The editions
consulted were as follows:

(1) The *nāgarī* Vulgate: *The Mahābhārata: With the commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha.* 7
   vols. Poona: Shankar Narhar Joshi (Citrashala Press), 1929-1936.

(2) The *baṅgla* Vulgate: *Mahābhāratam (janmaśatavārṣikasaṁskaraṇam).* 2nd
   ed. 43 vols. Kalikātā: Viśvāṇī Prakāśanī, 1976-1993.

(3) The Kumbakonam Southern Edition: *Sriman Mahabharatam*, ed. T.R.
   Krishnācharya and T.R. Vyāsācharya. 2nd edition. 8 vols. Delhi: Sri
   Satguru Publications, 1985. First published 1906-1914 by
   Madhvavilasapustakālaya, Kumbakona.

(4) The P.P.S. Sastri Southern Edition: *The Mahābhārata*, ed. P.P.S. Sastri.
   18 vols. Madras: V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu and Sons, 1933.

(5) The Critical Edition: *The Mahābhārata*, ed. Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar
   et al. 19 vols. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933-1966.[87]

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[87] A word is necessary here on the relationship between items (1)-(4) and the material of
the Critical Edition's critical apparatus (6). We must remember that the Critical Edition is
constituted solely from manuscripts and as such makes no reference to the earlier published
editions *per se* in its critical apparatus. However, many manuscripts used in forming the Critical
Edition were also used for these earlier editions — the *nāgarī* Vulgate from manuscripts referred
to in the Critical Edition apparatus as "Dn1, Dn2," etc.; the *baṅgla* Vulgate from the "B" group,
and the southern editions from Telugu (T), Grantha (G) and Malayālam (M) manuscripts. Hence I
decided that the simplest approach, given that these earlier editions are still available and the
books in question so small, was to read these earlier published editions simultaneously alongside

(6) The variants and so-called "asterix" passages for Books 17 and 18 of the Critical Edition. These are the verses relegated to the Critical Edition's critical apparatus and appendices.[88]

My purpose in consulting these editions was to find any significant deviation from the Critical Edition's rendering of the poem or evidence of an alternate ending. Naturally, there are many variations with such terms as *evaṁ/eva, tataḥ/tathā*, vocatives, case differences carrying the same meaning, opening invocations, extended manuscript colophons, the *phalaśruti* verses and so on. However, all these extant editions nonetheless provide the same ending, in substance and detail, for the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion. Comparing the earlier published editions and the Critical Edition's deleted or appendix passages in this way can assure us that the extant manuscript traditions of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* know of no other ending for the story than that presented in the Critical Edition, which, once again, we may understand as an approximation of the normative redaction. All elements of the principal narrative are shared by all sources and there is no narrative episode unique to any edition. All variations are matters of detail, and only one such variation calls for close investigation, namely (Critical Edition) 18.5.5-8, which is examined closely in chapter 4. The Critical Edition's text thus represents the best available rendering of the *Mahābhārata*'s ending, and provides the basic narrative material shared by all extant manuscripts of Books 17 and 18. While there are differences in minor details, the various geographically distant manuscripts are in consensus as to how the story ends; the Critical Edition abstracts this consensus and is therefore a satisfactory "pan-Indian" rendering of the Sanskrit manuscript tradition.

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the Critical Edition text instead of looking through the mass of variants provided in the apparatus so as to reconstitute the manuscripts upon which these earlier editions were based. In doing so I accounted for most of the variants between manuscripts, with the exception of some of the asterix passages, which I therefore consulted as well. Of course many of these asterix passages appear in the earlier published editions (e.g. 13* for 17.3.11 occurs in all previously published editions except for P.P.S. Sastri's), but on occasion one finds verses never published before (e.g. 10* for 17.2.1), and hence, despite some redundancy I consulted these deleted lines as well in order to exhaust the remaining available materials.

[88] The "* (asterix) passages" are verses failing to make the cut of the Critical Edition text, but are preserved in the appendices to each *parvan*: "...[A]ll lines belonging to one recension only, and *a fortiori* such as pertain to a combination of manuscripts amounting to less than a recension, for which there is nothing corresponding in the other recension and which are not absolutely necessary for the context — all lines, in short, with a defective title — have been placed in the footnotes or the Appendix, pending further inquiry regarding their credentials." Sukthankar, *Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, xcv. These passages should be understood as later additions to particular manuscripts, otherwise the material would be attested more widely in other manuscript groups.

1.2.3. Evidence of the *parvānukramaṇī* and *parvasaṁgraha*

Before looking at some evidence external to the Critical Edition text, we should take note of *Ādiparvan, adhyāya* 2 which provides a list of the 100 minor *parvans* of the *Mahābhārata* (*parvānukramaṇī*) and the summaries of the 18 major ones (*parvasaṁgraha*). The passage 1.2.230-232 says of Book 17 that "the Pāṇḍavas, bulls-among-men, having renounced the kingdom, went to the greatest achievement along with the divine Draupadī." Of Book 18 all that is said is that it is divine (*divya*), not of mortal origin (*amānuṣya*) and abounding in *tapas* (*tapodhana*). These lists also include the *Harivaṁśa* and *Bhaviṣyat* as the 99th and 100th minor *parvans* and hence the *parvānukramaṇī* and *parvasaṁgraha* are even later than the sections which call themselves appendices (*khila*) to the *Mahābhārata*. The most that can be said of their dates, then, is that "[t]hey are certainly prior to 1000 A.D., when the Javanese Bhārata and the Āndhra Bhāratamu were composed; because both these works contain similar lists, which agree in many particulars with our list (i.e. the Pune critically edited text of Ādiparvan 2)."[89]

However, what is of interest to us here is the size of the books described in the *parvasaṁgraha*: in the Critical Edition's reading, Book 17 has 3 *adhyāyas* of 120 *ślokas*; 18 has 5 *adhyāyas* of 200 *ślokas*. Sukthankar confirms these *śloka*-number figures against the Javanese *Mahābhārata*'s figures of 123 (17) and 200 (18) and the southern recension's figures of 120 (17) and 200 (18), and declares of the *parvasaṁgraha* figures for Book 17 that "the Indian sources, including the MSS., uniformly divide this short parvan into three adhyāyas; and the unanimous Indian reading cannot be called into question... ." Similarly of Book 18 he states "there cannot be any doubt that the correct [*adhyāya*] figure is 5, which is given by all editions and MSS. of the *Mahābhārata*."[90] The Critical Edition text of Book 17 does indeed consists of 3 *adhyāyas*, although its total number of verses is 106; likewise Book 18 has 5 *adhyāyas* of 194 couplets. Some 20 verses are therefore "missing," although the critically edited text frequently offers "couplets" of three lines, hence often the same quantity of material may appear to have fewer verses than another source. In any case, the description of the size of the *Mahāprasthānika* and *Svargārohaṇaparvan* at 1.2.230-232 is itself the critical result of unanimous sources, and the Critical Edition text of these books comes very close to the purported size. We can therefore be assured that Books 17 and 18 as we have them today are almost identical in size to the ones known to the author of the *parvānukramaṇī* and *parvasaṁgraha*.

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[89] Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, "Epic Questions II: The Parvasaṁgraha Figures." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 23 (1942-44), 550.

[90] Ibid, 557.

1.2.4. Renderings of the *Mahābhārata*'s Ending in Epitome and *kāvya* Literature

But how old are the manuscripts making up the substance of the Critical Edition? It is true that none of them are anywhere nearly as old as the aforementioned 2nd - 3rd century CE Spitzer manuscript. Of the dated materials consulted to constitute *parvans* 17 and 18 of the Critical Edition, the oldest manuscript is dated to 1611 and the most recent to 1841 (Kollam 1016), although the majority are undated. On the average this is quite typical of the dated manuscripts as a whole consulted by the Critical Edition, which are bracketed by a Nepali manuscript of 1511 on the one end and a Malayālam of 1842 on the other. Hence the dated materials for Books 17 and 18 are typical of the Critical Edition as a whole and are consistent with those consulted for the other 16 books. While the Spitzer manuscript, which may possibly attest to some form of the *Mahābhārata* lacking, among other things, the Great Departure and Ascension to Heaven, can claim an antiquity far outreaching the oldest extant manuscript of the *Mahābhārata*, the extant materials, late as they are, are uniform and must be privileged above a single, uncorroborated and badly damaged source.

The extant manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata* may be projected back at least to the 11th century CE with the help of Kṣemendra, the author of the *Bhāratamañjarī* or [*Flower*] *Garland of the Bhārata*, an epitome or condensed retelling of the *Mahābhārata*. We know that Kṣemendra wrote under the protection of Kings Ananta and Kalaśa of Kashmir (r. 1028 - 1063 and 1063 - 1089, resp.), his period of literary activity covering somewhere between 1025-1075. In addition to his epitome of the *Mahābhārata* he wrote a *Rāmāyanamañjarī* and is especially known for his *Avadānakalpalatā* and synopsis of Guṇādhya's now-lost *Brhatkathā*. His *Bhāratamañjarī* is the oldest available epitome of the *Mahābhārata*, written under the name Vyāsadāsa, and surely was based on northern manuscripts from which the Critical Edition's "K" or Kashmiri manuscript group has descended. Appendix 2 provides a full translation of the conclusion of the *Bhāratamañjarī*.

When we look at the *Bhāratamañjarī* it is clear that Kṣemendra's understanding of how the *Mahābhārata* ends is equivalent to what we have in the Critical Edition of today. Even through the process of condensing and epitomizing the story we can identify all the principal narrative elements of Books 17 and 18, including most of the important details. Certain passages are almost as long as the Critical Edition's (compare, for example, Kṣemendra's five and a half verses relating the description of hell with the Critical Edition's six). Elsewhere it is clear that he is condensing material from sources very similar or identical to that of the Critical Edition. For example, the argument between Yudhiṣṭhira and Indra over the dog consists, in the Critical Edition (17.3.7-15) of several back-and-forth statements, wherein Yudhiṣṭhira is offered admission to heaven with his mortal body if he will renounce his canine companion. In Kṣemendra's account, however, Indra initially speaks neither of dogs nor of embodied trips to heaven, saying simply 'O King, come to my fortress!,' to which Yudhiṣṭhira replies: 'I do

not want heaven with this body deprived of the dog' (*rājan matpuram ehīti śakreṇokto jagāda saḥ | śunā virahitaḥ svargaṁ saśarīro na kāmaye ||*). It is obvious that Kṣemendra is simply condensing the details of manuscripts closely resembling, if not identical to, those of the Critical Edition. A similar passage illustrating this condensing process is (Critical Edition) 18.3.38-41:

> Thusly addressed, that sage of kings, your great-grandfather, went along with Dharma and with all those whose abode is among the thirty [Gods]. The king, having plunged into that auspicious river of the gods, the pure Gaṅgā praised by seers, renounced his mortal body. Then Yudhiṣṭhira, the Dharma King, having become a divine form, free of enmity, his sorrow gone, was bathed in that water. Then wise Yudhiṣṭhira, the king of the Kurus, went, surrounded by the gods, accompanied by Dharma, praised by the great seers.

Corresponding to these verses Kṣemendra provides (18.25c/d-26) "Thusly addressed by the king of Gods, Yudhiṣṭhira, his sorrow dispelled, having bathed in the waters of the heavenly Gaṅgā of celestial splendour at the invocation of Dharma, [and] having abandoned his mortal nature, went to the holy assembly of the gods."

Other such instances of corroboration between Kṣemendra's *Bhāratamañjarī* and the Critical Edition text will be offered below as we take up a second *Mahābhārata* epitome for comparison. For now a quick glance at Appendices 1 and 2 should make it clear that this Kashmiri poet provides testimony that the text as constituted in the Critical Edition, despite the fact that its oldest dated manuscript hails from 1611, faithfully represents the northern tradition's *parvans* 17 and 18, at least as far back as the 11th century. In addition, we have already seen that the extant manuscript tradition for Books 17 and 18 is uniform across the subcontinent, and hence Kṣemendra's testimony need not be limited to northern manuscripts alone. In fact, were we to know nothing of Kṣemendra's historic and geographic situation, we might just as easily assume that the conclusion of his *Bhāratamañjarī* was based on southern manuscripts. It should hence be clearer now that the antiquity of the ending that the Critical Edition offers is considerably greater than the Critical Edition's oldest dated manuscript.

For further confirmation along these lines, we may look to another epitome, the *Bālabhārata* of Amaracandra Sūri. We know that this Jain poet wrote in the court of King Vīśaladeva of Gujarat, around the mid-13th century.[91] The conclusion of this *kāvya* (court poetry or "Belles-Lettres") epitome is provided in Appendix 3.[92] In much the same way as Kṣemendra's

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[91] Madabhushi Krishnamachariar, *History of Classical Sanskrit Literature* (3rd ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), 199-200.

[92] Amaracandra Sūri's style is closer to true *kāvya* than Kṣemendra, and I beg the

Bhāratamañjarī, the *Bālabhārata* is clearly a poetic retelling based on materials similar to those of the Critical Edition.

A few examples of the corroboration between the Critical Edition, *Bhāratamañjarī* and *Bālabhārata* will suffice. Amaracandra Sūri begins his Book 17 with the absolutive phrase "So the king [Yudhiṣṭhira], having heard of the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis ..." (*śrutvātha vṛṣṇinidhanaṁ*), as does Kṣemendra (*atha vṛṣṇikṣayaṁ śrutvā*) and the Critical Edition (*evaṁ vṛṣṇyandhakakule śrutvā*). Clearly in these cases the preceding book, the *Mausalaparvan*, closes with Yudhiṣṭhira receiving the news from Arjuna about the final fates of their Yādava friends, the final line then being recalled at the start of the next *parvan*. All the key moments of the departure and ascension to heaven are attested in the *Bālabhārata*; details such as Yudhiṣṭhira's explanations to Bhīma for why they all fell are the same as in Kṣemendra and the later manuscripts; in fact the *Bhāratamañjarī*, *Bālabhārata* and Critical Edition all specify that during this exhausting walk Yudhiṣṭhira never looks back as his family drops to the ground one by one (*Bhāratamañjarī* 17.14 *anāvṛttamukha*; *Bālabhārata* 17.18 *nākṣipaccakṣurapi*; Critical Edition 17.2.26 *anavalokayan*). Later on Yudhiṣṭhira's notorious lie to Droṇa during the battle is recalled as a reason for his having to witness hell (*Bhāratamañjarī* 18.24 *asatyaleśasaṁsparśād etad droṇavadhāt tava*; *Bālabhārata* 18.13 *guror vinigrahe'vocad yad asatyalavaṁ bhavān* | *adarśi durgatis te'sau tat palaṁ* [sic] *māyayā mayā* ||; Critical Edition 18.3.14 *vyājena hi tvayā droṇa upacīrṇaḥ sutaṁ prati* | *vyājenaiva tato rājan darśito narakas tava* ||). Such shared details could be multiplied; in any case the principal events such as the argument over the dog with Indra, the topsy-turvy experiences in heaven and hell, and the final vision of heaven are all attested in Amaracandra Sūri's *Bālabhārata*. What is significant for the present purpose is to note that, although he is later than Kṣemendra, this poet lived and wrote some 1500 kilometers from Kashmir in Gujarāt, and hence provides testimony as to the state of the *Mahābhārata* in the West as Kṣemendra does in the North. As with Kṣemendra, it is clear that the materials available to Amaracandra Sūri for the *Mahābhārata*'s ending were not appreciably different from the extant manuscripts of today.

One final source should be mentioned before we make a final conclusion about all these materials, namely the *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana, written in the second half of the ninth century. As Gary Tubb has shown, Ānandavardhana claimed that the predominant poetic flavour or *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata* was that of *śānta* or peace. Tubb translates Ānandavardhana's claim that for Vyāsa "... the creation of dispassion is the principal purport of his work, by composing a conclusion that produces a despondent feeling in response to the sorry end of the

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reader's patience where I have butchered or missed altogether the poet's playful phrasing; consequently Appendix 3 frequently provides the transliterated original alongside my attempts to render the poem into English.

Vṛṣṇis and the Pāṇḍavas... ."[93] Putting aside the issue of whether or not the *Mahābhārata* indeed has one predominant *rasa* throughout, it is clear that for Ānandavardhana, the *Mahābhārata* ends in just the way as we have been describing until now — the final renunciation, ascent to heaven, and visions of hell and heaven — since the *Dhvanyāloka* attempts to extend the *rasa* evoked by these events back onto the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. Ānandavardhana's work therefore assures us that the great departure and ascension to heaven were understood to constitute the *Mahābhārata*'s final episodes at least from the time of the 9th century.

Taking all these materials together — all the manuscript evidence as gathered in the Critical Edition and represented by the earlier published editions, the *Bhāratamañjarī* of Kṣemendra, the *Bālabhārata* of Amaracandra Sūri, and the *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana — I think it is possible to suggest that, as far as available materials for the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* tradition are concerned, traditional India has never known an ending for the epic that differs in any appreciable way from the story with which we are presented in the Critical Edition, and that convincing evidence of some other or "more authentic" ending has simply never been established. We have seen that the narrative of the extant manuscripts is confirmed by the two epitomes and in basic plot by Ānandavardhana as well; this places the antiquity of this ending as far back as the ninth century. Meanwhile the two epitomes mentioned here attest to the existence of similar or identical materials in Kashmir and Gujarat for the *Mahābhārata*'s ending, and the extant manuscripts hailing from across the subcontinent do not differ except in minor details. Chronologically speaking, then, if the story of the great departure and ascent to heaven is late or somehow an addition to a pre-existing epic, this work of redaction would have to have been performed on a form of the text predating even the earliest form of the text that we can infer, that is to say the written archetype or normative redaction.

Geographically speaking, there is equally no reason to doubt the unanimity across the subcontinent where the *Mahābhārata*'s ending is concerned. Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* there are more substantial differences, from region to region, than those we find in Books 17 and 18, but the materials in question show that the *Mahābhārata*'s ending has not been developed variously in different regions, but rather seem to all have derived from a common source. In other words, the Critical Edition's narrative in Books 17 and 18 offer us the original ending of the form of the *Mahābhārata* from which all later traditions descended, and constituted the conclusion of the "written archetype" or normative redaction.

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[93] Gary A. Tubb, "*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 176.

In this chapter I hope to have set the grounds for the remainder of the dissertation, first by presenting a thorough synopsis of the books in question, and perhaps more importantly by establishing that this rendering of the poem's conclusion is, despite the reservations of certain scholars, the authentic termination of the normative redaction.

This latter task involved replying to scholars who explicitly or implicitly locate the poem's ending elsewhere, or posit the existence of an older, shorter text concluding with some other episode. Finding such claims unwarranted, I then introduced a brief survey of the extant manuscripts, verse compendiums and other sources predating the manuscripts used for the preparation of the Critical Edition. These sources do not attest to any significant deviation from the Great Setting-Forth and Ascension to Heaven as presented in the synopsis section of this chapter. I hope, then, to have demonstrated, so far as the extant materials allow, that *parvans* 17 and 18 of the Critical Edition make up the poem's original ending — that is to say, that they correspond to the normative redaction or written archetype's ending.

Before we turn to the first of the two issues addressed in this dissertation, a restatement of the work to follow is in order. I will examine, in chapters 2 and 3, the manner in which the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī die, and their experiences in the afterlife in chapter 4. As is the case for much of the rest of the *Mahābhārata*, there may appear to be little of the Vedic world on the surface of these narrative sequences. But I will argue that if we do not adopt a reading of these passages which is attuned to Vedic ritual and mythic elements, we will miss an entire dimension of the poem and misunderstand why the epic ends the way it does. In particular, I will argue that the way the heroes die and their post-death experiences are best understood against a background of particular Vedic themes: the Vedic rite of the *yātsattra* in the former case, and the old Vedic trope of the battle between the *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons) in the latter.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0. Introduction

In section 1.1.1. we took note of the peculiar way in which the Pāṇḍavas choose to die. The text does not state explicitly where the group is going, but the title of Book 17 — *Mahāprasthānikaparvan* — and a single verse at the very beginning thereof,[94] suggests that they are performing a *mahāprasthāna* ("great setting-forth") or suicide-by-walking. This, as we have seen, is prescribed in *dharmaśāstra* or legal literature for anyone wishing to bring their life to a close.[95] Given the book's title and the remark that Yudhiṣṭhira "set his mind upon *prasthāna*," there can be little doubt that the author or authors wished to depict the death of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī at least in part as a *mahāprasthāna*. Indeed, Draupadī, Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhīma do perish in the manner of *mahāprasthins*, as all but Yudhiṣṭhira walk to the point of fatal exhaustion.

Here we might note that elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, important characters have died by *yoga*,[96] by controlling their death so as to make it coincide with an auspicious astronomical moment,[97] by fire,[98] in unusual ways such as being shot in the foot,[99] in a drunken brawl,[100] by physically joining another living person's body,[101] by treachery and murder,[102] and most importantly, by dying honorably in battle.[103] It therefore seems natural to ask why the Pāṇḍavas die in the manner that they do.

Moreover, while their deaths seem to constitute a *mahāprasthāna*, we saw that both Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira appear to have something else in mind, since the demise of each family member is a shock to the former and must be explained by the latter. Bhīma's exclamations are not simply laments at the loss of his wife and younger brothers, but indignant protestations at the injustice of each one's death, including his own.[104] In his replies, Yudhiṣṭhira cites personal shortcomings which would appear to account for the death — a death apparently understood as a

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[94] *prasthāne matim ādhāya* [*yudhiṣṭhiraḥ*] | 17.1.2c.

[95] See above, page 25.

[96] Droṇa, for example, actually dies through *yoga*, even though Dhṛṣṭadyumna cuts his head off immediately afterwards (7.135.35-45). For a stimulating treatment of the theme of yogic death see Peter Schreiner, "Yoga — Lebenshilfe oder Sterbetechnik?" *Umwelt & Gesundheit* 3/4 (1988): 12-18.

[97] This is how Bhīṣma engineers his own death in 13.154.

[98] As we noted above, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī, Kuntī and others die in a forest conflagration set off by their ritual fires (15.45).

[99] This is Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa's manner of death at 16.5.20.

[100] Book 16 centers on this act of self-destruction carried out by the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas.

[101] Vidura literally walks into Yudhiṣṭhira's body and disappears (15.33.25).

[102] The soldiers of the Pāṇḍavas' army are murdered in their sleep in Book 10.

[103] Most of the warriors in the *Mahābhārata* die in the course of the great battle related in Books 6-9.

[104] 17.2.5, 9, 14, 20, 24.

failure of some kind. As such, Bhīma and Yudhiṣthira seem to have some specific goal in their sights beyond self-imposed death by walking. Indeed, it becomes clear subsequently that this goal is heaven itself, thought to be accessible in the distant North. Yudhiṣthira does not die initially, but succeeds in reaching heaven in his mortal body, and is lavishly praised for doing so. When he does die physically afterwards, it is by diving into the Gaṅgā river and exchanging his mortal form for a heavenly one.

We might ask, then, if the family is performing a *mahāprasthāna*, why does Bhīma get upset? Why do they walk to the North? Why does Yudhiṣthira "make it" to heaven without dying if he has undertaken this self-imposed death through exhaustion? And why does he finally die by drowning? It would seem that understanding the Pāṇḍavas' deaths simply as a *mahāprasthāna* can only give us part of the picture. Consequently, I will propose an additional framework whereby we can understand the manner in which the heroes die, and argue that behind the account of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths lies a Vedic ritual — the *yātsattra* or "mobile sacrificial session" — which may have helped to shape the substance and sequence of Books 17 and 18.

In proposing this kind of reading of the poem's conclusion, I will take up a theme from *Mahābhārata* scholarship that has often proven fruitful in the past: the identification of ritual structures beneath the narrative events of the epic. In particular, I will propose in this chapter that the Vedic rite of the *yātsattra* — or more particularly, the *sārasvata yātsattra* or "mobile sacrificial session along the Sarasvatī river" — helped to shape the narrative sequence and content of Books 17 and 18. Subsequently in chapter 3, I will pursue this further and propose that the institution of pilgrimage or *tīrthayātrā* also played a role in the construction of the narrative of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths. As we will see, outlining the important family relationship between the two ritual forms of the *sārasvata yātsattra* and *tīrthayātrā* will help us understand what may have motivated certain elements in the construction of the *Mahābhārata's* conclusion. The concerns of this chapter are thus limited to the *yātsattra*, and will be extended in chapter 3 in a close examination of the *yātsattra's* younger ritual cousin, the *tīrthayātrā*. I will argue that both of these ritual forms acted as frames of reference for the authors of the final scenes of the epic.

Section 2.1. offers a brief background on the particular trend in *Mahābhārata* scholarship which seeks out the traces of Vedic ritual behind the text's surface content. Section 2.2. then provides an overview of the Vedic *sattra* rite, and in particular the sub-variety thereof called *yātsattra*. Subsequently in section 2.3. I will attempt to follow the model for reading the text introduced in 2.1, situating the events of Books 17 and 18 against the complex of ritual and mythic motifs of the *yātsattra*. In so doing I hope to demonstrate that bringing Vedic themes and motifs to our reading of the final scenes of the *Mahābhārata* can help us understand better why these key moments of the poem may have been composed as they were. As in the chapters to follow, I will suggest here that we

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must look beyond the surface of the narrative — beyond the initial *kṣatriya* tale of war and valour — and appreciate that deeper structures and themes of the Vedic world impacted the creation of the text in its present form.

2.1. *Mahābhārata* Narrative and Vedic Ritual

What does it mean to posit a structuring influence of Vedic ritual on the narrative events of the epic? On the one hand, we can easily point to the presence of ritual and material components of Vedic sacrifice within the text: all sorts of Vedic rites are performed in the course of the *Mahābhārata* story. In addition, Vedic sacrifice is frequently evoked in similes throughout the poem and otherwise forms a part of the text's overall imagery. The battle itself is often likened to a sacrifice, the analogy played out at some length in more than one passage, or hinted at with phrases such as "*śastrayajña*" ("sacrifice of weapons") or "*raṇayajña*" ("sacrifice of battle").[105] These constitute obvious examples of Vedic sacrificial elements in the *Mahābhārata*. However, a less conspicuous association between Vedic sacrifice and the events of the *Mahābhārata* story can be detected beyond its basic presence in the story content or poetic evocation. This deeper link between the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative structure and Vedic ritual has been a topic of some interest since the appearance of J.A.B. van Buitenen's 1972 article "On the Structure of the Sabhāparvan of the Mahābhārata."[106] The method exemplified in this paper of identifying the sub-rites and sequences of a Vedic ritual beneath the *Mahābhārata*'s story episodes has, as we will see below, often been taken up by later scholarship.

van Buitenen has argued that the key narrative events of the *Sabhāparvan* or second book of the *Mahābhārata* are themselves patterned after the sequence of events in a Rājasūya ceremony or Vedic rite for the consecration of a king. The fact that the events of this book revolve around (but are not limited to) Yudhiṣthira's Rājasūya sacrifice, while not describing the actual rite in any detail, makes the hypothesis all the more interesting that the structure of the Vedic rite underlies the narrative events of the entire *parvan*. van Buitenen lays out several important parallels between the rite as detailed in the ritual texts and the narrative events of the *Sabhāparvan*,[107] the most important of which is the dice game.

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[105] 2.20.14-15; 3.242.13-15; 4.23.27; 5.57.12-13; 5.139.29-51; 5.154.4; 7.80.22-23; 8.40.89; 9.59.25; 12.99.12-13.

[106] J.A.B. van Buitenen, "On the Structure of the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*," in *Studies in Indian Literature and Philosophy: Collected Articles of J.A.B. van Buitenen*, ed. Ludo Rocher (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).

[107] van Buitenen proposes the following parallels: In the ritual texts the Rājasūya rite begins with an oblation to Anumati, the personification of "consent," while Yudhiṣthira's Rājasūya begins with seeking consent from Kṛṣṇa (2.12.35-40). The ritual texts prescribe, prior to the actual unction of the king, a rite called *digvyāsthāpana* wherein the king takes a step in each cardinal direction, while in the narrative of the *Sabhāparvan* Yudhiṣthira's unction is preceded by

Within the framework of van Buitenen's hypothesis, the dice game takes on a new significance: a game of dice is an indispensible part of the conclusion of any actual Rājasūya rite, prescribed in the ritual texts to follow after the consecration. And so, in the narrative events of the *Sabhāparvan*, we find a game of dice wherein Yudhisthira stakes and loses the kingly status he has just asserted by performing the Rājasūya rite.

van Buitenen thus proposed that much of Book 2 appears to rest the outline of its narrative events on the structure of the very ritual which it does not actually describe from the point of view of its ritual execution. But we do have in the *Sabhāparvan* the royal or military perspective on the events of a Rājasūya, whereas the earlier *śrauta* texts or ritual manuals, copiously detailed from the priests' ritual perspective, offer little of interest where the actual political pretensions of the king are concerned. Hence van Buitenen remarked that "[n]either priest nor baron ... gives the full story... ."[108] But thanks to van Buitenen's insightful observations, we can draw up a clearer picture of both.

In this way van Buitenen brought to the attention of *Mahābhārata* scholarship an important detail: although the several Vedic rites occuring in the *Mahābhārata* are seldom described to the extent we would like, in several important passages of the poem the structure and sequence of these rites appear to be known to the *Mahābhārata*'s authors, and can occasionally be detected as sub-surface structuring patterns underlying narrative events. In a similar way, other scholars have sought to demonstrate that the *Mahābhārata* is not just a war epic containing instances of Vedic ritual within its story, but that Vedic ritual influences the poem's narrative in a deeper way.

One such researcher was Heino Gehrts, whose 1975 work bears some similarities to van Buitenen's hypothesis regarding the *Sabhāparvan*, although he applies the model over the entire epic: from start to finish, the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative structure is based on the model of the Rājasūya.[109] Initially investigating

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a *digvijaya* or literal military conquest, carried out by the Pāndavas under their elder brother's directive, of the neighboring lands spread out in the 4 cardinal directions (2.23-29). The *abhiṣeka* rite of consecration itself then follows in the Vedic rite, and in the *Mahābhārata* text as well (2.30-32). Following Yudhisthira's unction comes the *arghābhiharaṇa* or reception of a guest-gift, which corresponds to the gifting of the leftover unction water described in ritual texts. A moment in the ritual performance of the Rājasūya involving a symbolic chariot expedition and mock conflict seems to be reflected in the next episode of Yudhisthira's ceremony, namely the killing of Śiśupāla (2.37-42).

[108] van Buitenen, "On the Structure of the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*," 311.

[109] Heino Gehrts, *Mahābhārata: Das Geschehen und seine Bedeutung* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1975). This work was however not a mere extension of van Buitenen's ideas: "I recognized that far more ritual ideas (*Gedankengut*) were arranged in the epic than first I suspected ... A grand order, inner richness and an indubitable (*unerahnbar*) strength of formation governed by a deep insight revealed itself to me. In the meantime the work of van Buitenen had appeared as well, which confirmed for me, at least in terms of the *Sabhāparvan*, that the ritual interpretation of one of humankind's largest epics need not be understood only by the smallest circle of academic symbolicists." (8-9).

European consecration rites, he traced the theme of Indo-European royal ceremonies back to the *Mahābhārata* and in particular to the Rājasūya ceremony of Yudhiṣṭhira: "[T]he Mahābhārata is the consequent development of one central idea: the consecution [*sic*] of events as well as the characters and the distribution of its heroes are regulated by the form of one of India's ancient rituals of royal consecration, by the rājasūya."[110] Gehrts argued that the authors of the *Mahābhārata* were in fact warning against the dangers of this ambitious and provocative rite, which could only lead to the destruction of the warrior class. In this manner Gehrts was able to subordinate the events of the entire epic, including the war and its aftermath, to the rite of Yudhiṣṭhira's consecration which set off the internecine strife to begin with.

Another scholar investigating this theme of Vedic rites within the poem's narrative is Thomas Oberlies, for the most part focusing on the *Āraṇyakaparvan* or third book of the *Mahābhārata*. Articles appearing in 1995 and 1998 proposed underlying ritual patterns beneath the events of Books 2 and 3, particularly the Pāṇḍavas' *tīrthayātra* or pilgrimage tour.[111] He sums up this entire interpretive approach to the *Mahābhārata* and draws our attention to "how fruitful it is for the meaning of the *Mahābhārata* to take into consideration Vedic ritual and its underlying concepts ... It therefore seems promising *a priori* to interpret the story of the *Mahābhārata* in light of Vedic sacrificial ritual."[112]

While Gehrts and Oberlies sought out evidence of ritual patterns in the narrative sequence of events of the *Mahābhārata*, we noted above that Christopher Minkowski has directed our attention to the relationship between Vedic ritual and the *Mahābhārata*'s basic structure. Once again, Minkowski has pointed out that the epic's two outermost narrative frames take place on the occasions of Vedic *sattra* sacrifices, and that even the narrative structure of the poem reflects the structures of these rites. Minkowski also shows us the closer connections between the *Mahābhārata* and Vedic traditions of the *sattra* evident in the snake mythology and motifs which are associated with both the Vedic *sattra* literature and the text of the *Mahābhārata*.[113] The Vedic institution of the *sattra* is thus intimately tied up with the *Mahābhārata* in its present form.

Other examples of this method of "ritual reading" of the epic's narrative events could be added here,[114] but at this point the question we have been leading

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[110] Ibid, 292.

[111] Thomas Oberlies, "Arjunas Himmelreise und die Tīrthayātra der Pāṇḍavas: Zur Struktur des Tīrthayātrāparvan des Mahābhārata." *Acta Orientalia* 56 (1995): 106-124; Thomas Oberlies, "Die Ratschläge des Sehers Nārada: Ritual an und unter der Oberfläche des Mahābhārata," in *New Methods in the Research of Epic/Neue Methoden der Epenforschung*, ed. Hildegard L.C. Tristram (Tübigen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998), 125-141.

[112] Oberlies, "Arjunas Himmelreise," 108.

[113] Minkowski, "Snakes, *Sattras* and the *Mahābhārata*."

[114] For further examples along these lines, see Tieken, "The *Mahābhārata* after the Great Battle"; W.J. Johnson, trans. *The Sauptikaparvan of the Mahābhārata: The Massacre At Night*

up to presents itself: Could the type of ritual patterning of the epic's narrative events proposed by these scholars be applicable to the *Mahābhārata*'s concluding books? Given the often rich rewards which follow from this type of investigation, it would seem worthwhile to attempt a reading of the text in this manner. Furthermore, Minkowski has already given us a hint as to where we should look within the Vedic sacrificial traditions: the *sattra* rite is one of special importance for the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. Hence I will attempt to show in the following that a "ritual reading" of *parvans* 17 and 18, centering on the Vedic rite of the *sattra* and especially a sub-variety thereof called *yātsattra*, can contribute to our understanding of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths, and account for many of the elements found in these books which the *mahāprasthāna* model does not account for. To do this we must first familiarize ourselves with the ceremony of the Vedic *sattra* rite in general.

2.2.1. The *sattra* Variety of Rites[115]

The *sattra* rites (lit. "sitting" or "session") are one genre of several types of Soma sacrifice or rites wherein the principal offering is the juice of the intoxicating *soma* plant. The Soma sacrifices are divided into three groups, viz. (a) the *ekāha* or one-day rites, (b) *āhīna* or rites lasting from 2 to 12 days, but otherwise not differing appreciably from the *ekāhas*, and (c) the *sattra* rites which can last from 12 days to a year or even longer. All three of these forms of *soma* offering share various things in common, but there are some important contrasts between the *sattras* and the first two types of Soma sacrifice.

Among the more significant differences is the fact that the *sattra* involves priests alone. In the case of most other large-scale Vedic rituals, a group of priests serves a *yajamāna* or non-officiating patron-commissioner of the sacrifice, who enjoys for himself the merit of the rite. This scenario is typically presented as a marriage of priestly and aristocratic powers: a king, although not participating in the ritual performance, is present as observer throughout, while the rite is carried

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(New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxxv-xli; Reich, "Sacrificial Violence and Textual Battles."

[115] Here I will make only passing reference to the influential work of Jan Heesterman, whose hypotheses regarding the relationship between the *sattra* rites and the ancient culture of the *vrātyas* or wandering raiding-gangs has generated much scholarly response. On the relationship between the *sattras* and the *vrātyas*, see especially Jan C. Heesterman, "Vrātya and Sacrifice." *Indo-Iranian Journal* 6, no.1 (1962): 1-37; Jan C. Heesterman, "Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer." *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 8 (1964): 1-31; Jan C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Harry Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel: Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Vedischen Opfers.* (Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 1986); Jan C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Jan C. Heesterman, "Warrior, Peasant and Brahmin." *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no.3 (1995): 637-654.

out by the ritual experts who will eventually receive payment for their work. If the rite has been performed properly, the king will earn great merit as the patron of the ceremony. In the case of the *sattras*, however, there is no *yajamāna per se*, since all involved in the rite are themselves officiating priests of the *brāhmaṇa* class, who perform the rite for their own benefit under the direction of a group leader called *grhapati* or *sthapati*.[116] The solidarity of this group is signified by their collecting their own individual ritual fires together into one.[117]

Another aspect of the *sattra* rites is suggested by its name, lit. "sitting," from √*sad*, to sit (whence the conclusion of a *sattra* is described with the construction *ud*+√*sthā*, to stand up).[118] As with most Vedic rites involving the pressing of *soma*, *sattra*s incorporate periods of dialogue called *brahmodya* at moments of rest between ritual activities, wherein the priests would seat themselves, indulge their imaginations and test their debating skills. Given their designation, the *sattra* variety of sacrifices clearly placed a premium upon such moments of seated conversation and competitive dialogue. By means of these competitive *sattra* dialogues and riddling question-and-answer exchanges, participants tested each other's wits and mastery of obscure formulas. Anyone unable to think and respond quickly enough suffered severely.[119]

The seated dialogue of the *sattra* was not always fraught with conflict, however. The participants of a *sattra* also filled the "gaps" between their ritual responsiblities by telling the lore of ancient kings. We already know two such examples of inner-sacrificial storytelling: the *Mahābhārata* story is recounted at a *sattra* by Vaiśampāyana, who, "seated with those present at the sacrifice, pronounced the *Bhārata* during the intervals between the rites of the sacrifice, [being] incited repeatedly [to do so], 1.1.58." This recitation is in turn repeated by the bard Ugraśravas at a second *sattra* in Naimiṣa forest to the brahmins seated around their *grhapati* Śaunaka; these priests as well want to fill the gaps of their ritual project with the story of the great Bhārata war.

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[116] The *Mahābhārata* itself, however, provides an exception: Janamejaya is a king and patron of a snake *sattra*. At the level of the *Mahābhārata*'s outermost narrative frame, we find the more typical situation of *sattrins* being led by a *grhapati* or *sthapati*, namely Śaunaka.

[117] *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* 16.

[118] Böhtlingk / Roth gives, for *ud*+√*sthā*: (2) "von einer Opferhandlung u.s.w. *aufstehen* so v.a. *beendigen, schliessen:*" *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4.6.8.2: *sattrāt (ud*+√*sthā).*

[119] In *Mahābhārata* 3.132-134, we see a case of this: a priest named Aṣṭāvakra defeats his opponent Bandin at a *sattra* through mastery of obscure numerical formulae. The loser of this contest of wits is drowned just as he himself had sent those whom he had previously defeated to a watery death. Heesterman and Falk see in these high-stake *sattra* debates an echo of the ancient *vrātya* gangs who appear to have justified their aggressive raiding by challenging those they encountered with questions: anyone unable to respond appropriately would have to hand over his goods or suffer violence. The aggression and violence of these *vrātya* gangs is, according to Heesterman's hypothesis, recalled in the seated debate and poetic testing of the *sattra*. Falk states that "[t]he question of the *vrātyas'* aggression is thus linked to the poetry [of the *sattra*]: He who gave no reply to [the *vrātyas'*] knowledge (*Wissen*) had to buy himself free by gifts. Only he who resisted would be attacked." Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, 47.

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Whether testing each other's verbal and intellectual skills or recounting tales of bygone days, the special emphasis on seated dialogue which the designation *sattra* evokes is nonetheless peculiar insofar as the *sattra* rites also require that the participants wander about, and as such seem to bear an incongruous name.[120] Many important *sattra* rites called *ayanas* (lit. "course," "path") prescribe the priests to roam for months at a time. In the ritual prescriptions and mythology surrounding the *sattra* rites, then, we often find both an itinerant and seated aspect emphasized. One of the clearest examples of this will be examined in the following section, where we encounter a rite bearing the oxymoronic name *yātsattra* or "going-sitting."

Thus far we have discussed the institution of the *sattra* as a generic form of Vedic sacrifice. Of the salient features of this genre of rite, we have noted that *sattrins* are guided by a group leader, gather their ritual fires together in solidarity, emphasize debate and exchanges of wits, and often involve the participants in wandering over a long period of time. Below in section 2.2.2. we will examine a particular variety of this rite, namely the *yātsattra*, which features several peculiar elements distinguishing it from all other forms of *sattra*.

2.2.2. The *yātsattra*

The *yātsattra*, whose name as we have just noted is an oxymoron ("moving-seating/session": *yāt-*, from √*yā*, to go or move), is a sub-variety of the *sattra* rite and as such all that has been said in the foregoing about *sattras* applies to the *yātsattra*. In addition there are several peculiarities that distinguish this form of sacrificial session from the generic model, as will become clear in the following. The ritual texts preserve two forms of this rite, the *sārasvata* and *dārṣadvata*, which respectively take place along the banks of the Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī rivers.[121]

The *sārasvata yātsattra* is a rite, said to require 44 days, wherein the participants make their way upstream along the southern bank of the Sarasvatī river. The goal of this journey is "to reach heaven," or more particularly the source of the river known as Plakṣa Prasravaṇa. The daily movement upstream is measured by re-establishing the *yūpa* or sacrificial pole in a new location every day as determined by the casting of the *śamyā* peg used for measuring the sacrificial ground. The distance of these peg throws is said in the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* to be "36 paces," although the same text measures the entire journey as

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[120] Heesterman cites a passage from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (4.6.8.1-3) which attempts to reconcile the conflicting senses of sitting and wandering by offering complicated etymologies of the terms used for the *sattra*'s basic elements. The passage is hardly intelligible, and hence Heesterman remarks that "[t]he Śatapatha, deftly entwining the sitting down and the going, clearly tries to explain too much" (*The Broken World of Sacrifice*, 179).

[121] The *Mahābhārata* defines Kurukṣetra as the land between these two rivers at 3.81.175.
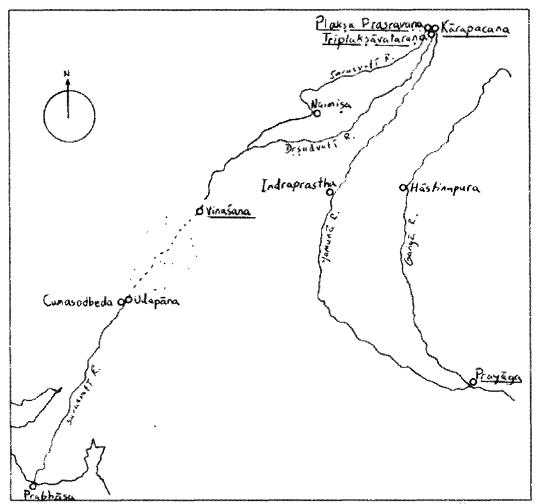
44 days on horseback as opposed to proceeding on foot.[122]

Fig. 2. Hypothesized course of the Sarasvatī river in the *Mahābhārata*[123]

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[122] *Pañcaviṁśa* [i.e. *Tāṇḍyamahā-*] *Brāhmaṇa*, 25.10.2, 16. The Sarasvatī river in Vedic times may have been as much as 600km long: Michael Witzel, "Sur le chemin du ciel." *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes* 2 (1984): 222 note 65. J. Ensink speculates that this journey must have taken several years: J. Ensink, "Problems of the Study of Pilgrimage in India." *Indologica Taurinensia* 2 (1974): 70.

[123] There is by no means a consensus in scholarship as to the course of the old Sarasvatī river. See, for example B.P. Radhakrishna, and S.S. Merh, eds. *Vedic Sarasvati: Evolutionary history of a lost river of northwestern India* (Bangalore: Geological Society of India, 1999) and rejoinder to that volume: Irfan Habib, "Imagining River Sarasvati: A Defense of Commonsense." *Social Scientist* 29, no.1/2 (2001): 46-74.

The venue for this mobile session, the Sarasvatī, is described in ancient texts as a swelling river (lit. "she with lakes / pools") originating high in the Himālayas and running southwest and then West towards Rajasthan and disappearing underground at a place called Vinaśana (see Figure 2). Reappearing further to the South-West at a site called Udapāna, it is said to flow from there into the Arabian sea at a site called Prabhāsa, around the area of Veraval in modern Gujarat state. Today this river is no more, but the present day Ghaggar Canal is likely its less impressive descendant.[124] There can be little doubt that in its day it was a remarkable body of water, as it is the most highly lauded of any river in the *Rgveda*.[125] In fact, this river's name has lived on as it were post-humously: in popular Hindu thinking today, the Sarasvatī is invisible (and considerably displaced from its apparent original location), being said to flow into the confluence of the Gangā and Yamunā at the site of Prayāga, which is therefore thought of as the confluence of the three holy rivers.

The *sārasvata yātsattra* begins with the consecration of the participants at Vinaśana on the southern bank of the Sarasvatī. The wives of the *sattrins* are also consecrated and join in the journey along the river.[126] Some texts assign this initial consecration to the seventh day of the light half of the month of Caitra (March-April),[127] others to the period of the winter solstice.[128] After the initial ceremonies, the *yātsattrins* gather their fires together, the first *śamyā* or peg throw is made and the sacrificial ground established on the spot where the *śamyā* lands. This process is repeated daily, following the course of the river upstream (initially eastwards), and eventually North-East as the *sattrins* climb into the Himālaya foothills towards Plakṣa Prasravaṇa, the source of the Sarasvatī. As they march along, the principal deity to whom the offerings are made is Agni, the God of Fire.

After the first few days, the participants reach the confluence of the Sarasvatī with the Dṛṣadvatī river and here perform an offering to Apāṁnapāt or Lord of the Waters. Fording the Dṛṣadvatī and continuing up the Sarasvatī to its source high in the north-eastern mountains, the *yātsattrins* reach Plakṣa Prasravaṇa. This location is in the vicinity of the Yamunā river and in particular a site called Kārapacana where the concluding *avabhṛtha* or ritual bath marking the end of the *sattra* is taken.

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[124] Modern-day Anupgarh in Rajasthan, near the border of Pakistan, seems a likely candidate for Vinaśana, while the ancient source of the river, Plakṣa Prasravaṇa, may be placed in the area of the modern-day Nag Tisba range in southern Himachal Pradesh / western Uttar Pradesh, near Candigarh.

[125] Ensink, "Problems of the Study of Pilgrimage in India," 68.

[126] Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, vol.2 (London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 349.

[127] Alfred Hillebrandt, *Ritual-Litteratur: Vedische Opfer und Zauber* (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1897), 158.

[128] Witzel, "Sur le Chemin du Ciel," 222, cites *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa*, 5.9.1 and *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* 7.4.8.

Almost identical to the *sārasvata yātsattra* is the *dārṣadvata yātsattra*, taking place in much the same manner along the Dṛṣadvatī river South of the Sarasvatī. Following the Dṛṣadvatī upstream leads to a site not far from Plakṣa Prasravaṇa to a site bearing a similar name: Triplakṣāvaharaṇa, also on the Yamunā. Hence the *dārṣadvata yātsattra*'s *avabhṛtha* or terminal bath marking the end of the rite is also to be taken at the Yamunā, not far from the *sārasvata*'s *avabhṛtha* site of Kārapacana.

In both the case of the Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī rites, these terminal points are said to be near or actually constitute "the world of heaven." Plakṣa Prasravaṇa is in fact only as far from heaven as it is from Vinaśana: 44 days on horseback.[129] As O.P. Bharadwaj notes, several other texts equate Plakṣa Prasravaṇa, Triplakṣāvaharaṇa and the upper Yamunā area with heaven.[130] Bharadwaj also points out that the *Mahābhārata* itself (wherein the site is known as Plakṣāvataraṇa) shares this view: "Truly do the wise call this foremost of the sacred fords of the Yamunā, known as Plakṣāvataraṇa, the door to the back of heaven." (3.129.13).[131]

The significance of Kārapacana's declared proximity to heaven becomes clearer when we read in the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* that the *sattrin*, upon taking the final bath there at the end of his *dārṣadvata yātsattra*, "disappears from the (eyes of) men."[132] In his translation of this passage, Caland makes a note about this curious disappearance of the *sattrin*: "This is differently interpreted by the Sūtrakāras [later commentators]: according to Dhānañjayya [*sic*], this course of iṣṭis [sacrificial rites] was destined for one who desires to retire from the world (pravrajiṣyat); he should not return to the community, but ascend the world of heaven: or, it means that he becomes separated from other people and fares better."[133] Contemporary scholarship also reads this passage as suggesting ritual suicide by drowning.[134]

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[129] *catuścatvāriṁśadāśvīnāni sarasvatyā vinaśanāt plakṣaḥ prāsravanas tāvaditaḥ svargo lokaḥ sarasvatīsammitena adhvanā svargaṁ lokaṁ yanti* | *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa*, 25.12.16.

[130] O.P. Bharadwaj, "Plakṣa Prasravana." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 58-59 (1977-78): 481-482. He cites *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.297-300; 3.150; *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* 4.28.18.

[131] Baradwaj, "Plakṣa Prasravaṇa," 483 (my translation). Plakṣāvataraṇa is however not strictly speaking a *tīrtha* or ford of the Yamunā river, as suggested by this verse. Bharadwaj notes: "it would be erroneous to construe Plakṣāvataraṇa as a tīrtha of the Yamunā. The intention appears to be to mention Plakṣāvataraṇa along with a tīrtha of the Yamunā which may be Kārapacana since, as seen above, both these adjoining regions are on the way to the world of heaven and quite close to it." (483).

[132] Willem Caland, trans. *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa: The Brāhmaṇa of Twenty-Five Chapters* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1931), verse 25.13.4.

[133] Ibid, 639,

[134] Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice*, 175; Andreas Bigger, "Wege und Umwege zum Himmel. Die Pilgerfahrten im Mahābhārata." *Journal Asiatique* 289, no.1(2001): 158; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the* Mahābhārata, 140.

Evidence for ritual suicide or self-imposed death by drowning in holy rivers seems to trace back as far as the late Vedic period. In discussing the site of Prayāga (modern Allahabad), J. Ensink remarks that "[i]n the paralipomena (khila) of the Rgveda there occurs one verse which is generally thought to refer to the junction of the Yamunā and Ganges, the practice of bathing and even giving up one's life there: [khila-khila 5, appended at RV 10.75.5] ... "Those who plunge into the water where the white and the black river meet ascend to heaven. Those wise people who give up their lives there obtain immortality."[135] Prayāga is the principal of four sites of the well-known Kumbha Melā festival which takes place every twelve years, during which time ritual suicides still take place even today. Although Prayāga is far down the Yamunā from Kārapacana, this passage cited by Ensink confirms the existence and legitimacy, at a very early period, of ritual suicide in the Yamunā. This should give us a hint as to the meaning of the Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa's claim that one bathing at Triplakṣāvaharaṇa "disappears from men."

Furthermore, as we will see in greater detail in the following chapter, Plakṣāvataraṇa (Plakṣa Prasravaṇa) is known in the Mahābhārata as a place where the gods performed the sārasvata yātsattra (3.129.21) and where men, desiring to die and reach heaven, come by the thousands (3.130.1). The purport of the Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa's statement that the yātsattrin "disappears" when taking his concluding bath at the head-waters of the Sarasvatī, and the frequent assertions that Kārapacana, Plakṣa Prasravaṇa and Triplakṣāvaharaṇa are heaven or near thereto should thus become clearer: the sattrin may profitably choose to end his mortal days in the holy waters of this site.

Hence the image of the sārasvata yātsattra I have proposed here is of an extended mobile ritual undertaking, conducted along the banks of the Sarasvatī (or Dṛṣadvatī in the case of the dārṣadvata yātsattra), terminating high in the northern mountains, where the participants may, at least in precept, end their lives by drowning. In doing so they complete the rite and attain heaven directly. But an important detail regarding the successful completion of the rite should be mentioned here: although the purpose of the undertaking is to reach heaven on foot, there is a provision that if one dies along the way, this constitutes a successful completion of the rite, and brings the sattrin to heaven as well.[136]

At this point some observations of Witzel's on the Sarasvatī river would not be out of place here, as they bear directly on the issue of the yātsattras and ritual suicide. Witzel has argued that in the minds of the poets of the Rgveda, the name Sarasvatī stood for the Milky Way in the night sky as well as the terrestrial river.[137] With this identification of terrestrial and celestial river in hand, Witzel

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[135] Ensink, "Problems of the Study of Pilgrimage in India," 68: sitāsite sarite yatra saṅgate tatrāplutāso divam utpatanti l ye vai tanvaṃ visṛjanti dhīrās te janāso' mṛtatvaṃ bhajante ll

[136] Hillebrandt, Ritual-Litteratur, 159.

[137] Witzel, "Sur le Chemin du Ciel." That the Milky Way was conceived of as a river is indicated by some of its more common names: nabhaḥsarit: "sky-river" or svargagaṅgā: "the

shows that much of the imagery of the *sattra* rites, and especially of the *sārasvata yātsattra*, takes on a rich new colouring.

In his essay Witzel goes to great lengths to illustrate precisely how the Milky Way would have appeared in the north-eastern night sky in northern India during Vedic times, and defines what a *sattrin* looking East early in the morning would see (indeed, he would always begin the day's rituals before dawn, facing this direction): the Milky Way appears to "ascend" over the course of the half-year from the winter solstice to the summer solstice, that is to say it rotates from a position parallel to, and hence partially concealed by, the north-eastern horizon in winter to a vertical position perpendicular to the eastern horizon in summer. Certain forms of *sattra* such as the *gavām ayana*, begun at the time of the winter solstice and culminating in summer, may have been understood to "raise the Sarasvatī," in the same way that the daily Agnihotra rite is understood to ritually impel the rising of the sun.[138]

This conception of the Sarasvatī as the Milky Way adds a whole new dimension to the notion of "ascending the Sarasvatī": the journey of a *sārasvata yātsattrin* begins at the time of the winter solstice[139] and ends when the the "door to heaven" is reached in summer as the celestial river attains a position perpendicular to the eastern horizon towards which the *sattrins*' entire journey has been directed. The Milky Way is now contiguous with the earth, appearing in the morning to flow down from heaven to touch the eastern horizon; this is what the *yātsattrin*s would see when reaching Plakṣa Prasravaṇa, the "Door to Heaven" and center of the world.[140] Taking their final bath here (never to emerge from the water), they attain heaven by "ascending the celestial river." This image of a celestial river-as-ladder is known in later Hindu tradition, as Diana Eck points out: "India's rivers are seen as originating in heaven and flowing vertically from the lake of divine waters in heaven, down through the atmosphere, and out upon the face of the earth ... [t]he Gaṅgā is therefore sometimes called *svarga-sopāna-sariṇī*, 'the flowing ladder to heaven.'"[141]

Some of Witzel's claims may be difficult to support, as not all the ritual texts specify that the *yātsattra* rites commence in winter, and thus we cannot be certain of the exact length of the journey up the Sarasvatī since the river no longer exists. Hence it may be difficult to prove that the *sattrins* would have arrived precisely at the time of the summer solstice to behold the milky way touching down at 90° on the Eastern horizon. However, there is no question that Vedic rites are always timed to coincide with auspicious astronomical phenomena (a fact proven by the existence of an entire science of astronomy — *jyotiṣavidyā* —

Gaṅgā of heaven" (Ibid, 217).

[138] Ibid, 217.

[139] If we follow Witzel's (22) reading of *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* 5.9.1 and *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* 7.4.8.

[140] *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* 4.26.12.

[141] Diana Eck, "India's 'Tīrthas': 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography." *History of Religions* 20, no.4 (1981): 324-325.

appended to the Vedic corpus, without which the rites would be ill-timed and hence disastrous). The rite of the *gavām ayana* gives us just one example of a *sattra* consciously arranged to parallel the course of the sun, commencing in the dark half of the year and reaching its *viṣuvat* or mid-point of the year-long rite at the time of the summer solstice.[142] Hence the notion that the *sārasvata yātsattra* was also scheduled so as to coincide with a conspicuous phenomenon of the night (or, more precisely, early morning) sky is certainly credible. In addition, a pragmatic detail overlooked by Witzel bears mentioning here as well: the upper ranges of the Himālaya are more accessible in warmer times of year. Anyone intending to walk there from as far away as Rajasthan (Vinaśana) would do well to start the journey in winter and arrive in summer.

Finally, the reference point of Prayāga may again be helpful in support of Witzel's claims regarding the timing of the *sārasvata yātsattra*: at the Mahā Kumbha Melā, ritual suicide or self-imposed death by drowning in the Yamunā is considered to bring the brave pilgrim directly to *mokṣa* or final emancipation, as long as the waters are entered at a particularly auspicious astronomical moment. According to Witzel's hypothesis, the *sārasvata yātsttra* is similarly scheduled such that ritual suicide by drowning at Kārapacana is not merely warranted by the holiness of the place, but by the special time at which the location is reached, that is when the terrestrial and celestial rivers meet.

Before we proceed, we should sum up what we have posited thus far about the *sattra* and *yātsattra* rites: The *sattra* sacrifices as a whole are unique in that they are undertaken by priests alone, with no ritual patron; rather, *sattrins* follow a *sthapati* or group leader and collect their individual fires together. Debate, contests of wit and riddling question-and-answer exchanges are emphasized as part of the "sitting" activity implied by the rite's designation *sattra*, while roaming, sometimes for months at a time, may also make up an important element of this kind of sacrifice. A sub-variety of *sattra*, the *yātsattra*, stresses this mobility explicitly, and is especially to be undertaken as a journey along the banks of the Sarasvatī river. The purpose of this journey is to "reach heaven." Once underway, the *yātsattrins*, accompanied by their wives, make daily offerings to Agni, and also to the Vedic god of waters Apāṁ Napāt at the confluence of the Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī rivers. The *sārasvata yātsattra* is concluded when, arriving at the head-waters of the river which is understood as the "door of heaven", the participants take their *avabhṛtha* or terminal bath and drown, thereby gaining instant access to heaven. Anyone not arriving at this point, but perishing along the way, is understood to have attained heaven already. A striking sense of what it may mean for the *yātsattrin* to "ascend the Sarasvatī" is suggested by Witzel, who has suggested that the termination of the *sārasvata yātsattra* is timed to coincide with the joining, as it were, of the celestial Milky Way and the earthly river.

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[142] Hillebrandt, *Ritual-Litteratur*, 157-158; Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, vol.2, 350-352.

Our next task is to bring this set of ritual motifs and gestures to a reading of Books 17 and 18. In section 2.3, I will endeavor to demonstrate that the author or authors of Books 17 and 18 were familiar with the *sattra* traditions and that they drew upon the imagery of the *sattra*, and especially the *yātsattra* rites, in their depiction of the Pāṇḍavas' final days. Here my purpose is not to suggest that these rituals were taken up as a rigid template for constructing the narrative events of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion, but rather that some of the key details of the story of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths can be accounted for by the hypothesis that the authors were familiar with this ritual form.

2.3. The *sattra* and *yātsattra* in Books 17 & 18

It is important to note here that there is no mention in Books 17 and 18 of the Sarasvatī river, and that the books' geography cannot be simply equated with the regions relevant to the *yātsattra* rite. Hence the elements of these books to be discussed do not constitute explicit references to the *sattra-yātsattra* complex discussed above. Yet as we saw when discussing the work of van Buitenen in section 2.1, Vedic sacrifice is seldom described in detail in the *Mahābhārata*, but is clearly familiar to the poem's authors and often underlies and informs their construction of narrative events. I will thus attempt to show that the authors draw on the imagery of the *sattra* and in particular the *yātsattra*; in other words, the complex of ritual and mythic motifs of the *sattra* do not so much dictate as colour the events of *parvans* 17 and 18. Certain of these are especially conspicuous, and suggest thereby that other subtler details might well be read in light of some of the ritual motifs and gestures of the *yātsattra* rite.

In Book 17, the Pāṇḍavas announce their departure, collect their ritual fires together and extinguish them, and set out together on foot with their common wife, led by the eldest Yudhiṣṭhira. As I have suggested above, the group is set upon the goal of heaven. This arrangement is suggestive of the collective *yātsattra* unit, who set out as a group intent upon the goal of heaven under the leadership of their *sthapati* or *gṛhapati*. As we noted above, those undertaking a *sārasvata* or *dārṣadvata yātsattra* are consecrated along with, and accompanied by their wives, who likewise follow the direction of the *sthapati*. In addition, we noted that one of the ways the *sattrins* assert this group solidarity is to gather their fires together into one collective. When the Pāṇḍavas throw their domestic fires together into the water, we may find a sense of this. While this is the appropriate thing to do for anyone renouncing the world, we should note the construction: *sam+ ud+ √sṛj ... agnīn* (17.1.20), "to pour forth fires together." The prefix *sam* suggests units being treated as a collective, and is consistent with the *sattrins*' gathering of their fires into a collective as a symbol of their interdependence.

Not long after they begin their journey, the group is stopped in their tracks in the encounter with Agni (17.1.31-41). Although the five brothers and Draupadī

have renounced everything, and are wearing only tree bark, Arjuna nonetheless is still hanging on to his Gāṇḍīva bow and two quivers. This is on account of his attachment to the jewels embedded in the bow (17.1.32).[143] These weapons had been offered to him by Agni, the god of fire, on the occasion of the burning of Khāṇḍava forest (1.216.1). Agni himself had received the Gāṇḍīva from Varuṇa.[144] But if the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī are now, as renunciants, reduced to a state of total poverty, indeed "just as when they had been defeated at dice (17.1.21)," it is most inappropriate for Arjuna to be carrying such a weapon. As soon as they come upon a body of water named Lauhitya (usually identified with the Brahmaputra river), Agni blocks their path (*mārgam āvṛtya tiṣṭhantaṁ*, 17.1.33) and demands the bow be returned to its rightful owner Varuṇa. The group can proceed no further until this matter is taken care of.

Here we should recall that during the course of the *sārasvata yātsattra*, the deity to whom the daily offerings are made is Agni. And not long after a group of *yātsattrin*s begin their journey from Vinaśana, they encounter the confluence of the Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī. This would present a considerable obstacle to their progress, but an offering made to Apāṁ Napāt or Lord of the Waters ensures that they cross safely to the other side of the Dṛṣadvatī. Following our ritual reading of Book 17, we might find interest in the fact that Arjuna returns the bow to its rightful owner by throwing it into the water. By the time of the *Mahābhārata*, the Vedic god Apāṁ Napāt has all but disappeared from religious imagination; instead we find that a different deity has become the principal Lord over bodies of water, and he is none other than the owner of the Gāṇḍīva: Varuṇa. Arjuna thus makes the offering to the God of Waters as known to the *Mahābhārata*. Agni clears the path and the group can then continue on their way. While this episode does make reference to the first occasion on which Arjuna received the bow from Varuṇa via Agni (17.1.36), and as such makes sense within the overall epic context, I would suggest that the hypothesis that the authors were familiar with the itinerary and elements of the *sārasvata yātsattra* might explain why the scenario takes place at this time and place: the Pāṇḍavas (wandering on foot in search of heaven, together with their wife, under the guidance of a leader) have not been long gone on their trip; their path is blocked once they arrive at a body of water, and Agni (to whom daily offerings are made by the *yātsattrin*) demands an offering be made to the Lord of Waters before they can proceed any further. Like *yātsattrin*s proceeding past the confluence of the Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī rivers by offering to Apāṁ Napāt, the Pāṇḍavas make it past the Lauhitya thanks to Arjuna's offering to Varuṇa.

The Pāṇḍavas then circumambulate the earth (*prādakṣiṇya pṛthivyā*), or more particularly, Āryāvarta or North-Central India. This gesture is of

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[143] See 4.38.20-35 for a description of these jewels. Earlier in the *Mahābhārata* we see how attached Arjuna is to this bow — he was about to kill his eldest brother merely for telling him to give the bow to someone else (8.49.9-13).

[144] See above, note 55.

considerable importance, and will be treated extensively in the following chapter. As our present concerns are with the *sārasvata yātsattra*, we will state only that the circumambulatory movement around Āryāvarta has no immediate connection with the *yātsattra per se*. But once we investigate the relationship between the *sārasvata yātsattra* and the rite of *prādakṣiṇyā tīrthayātrā* or circumambulatory pilgrimage, it will become clear that the *tīrthayātrā* may underlie the narrative events of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion as much as the *sārasvata yātsattra*, since these two ritual forms bear an important relationship one to the other in the epic.

After the tour of the earth, the family turns towards the North and sees the Himavat; they walk there, pass beyond this mountain range, and see a desert, and beyond that the *axis mundi*, Mount Meru. These are the last geographic places mentioned. At this point it hardly seems that the Pāṇḍavas are simply wandering for the sake of exhausting their last lifes' breaths; their journey has followed a precise route which now takes them directly North. Once they cross through the Himālaya, and see the desert and Meru, they begin to die. We see here a clear example of the North as the location of the mythic regions beyond the range of mortal creatures, and the place of heaven or door thereto, asserted in the ritual literature of the *yātsattra* and elsewhere. As we noted above, the three most significant sites for the *sārasvata* and *dārṣadvata yātsattras* — Plakṣa Prasravaṇa, Triplakṣāvataraṇa and Kārapacana — are all located in the North, clustered together in the mountains where the Yamunā springs forth.

But most significant here is the fact that all but the leader die along the way — they do not reach the goal of heaven physically as does Yudhiṣṭhira. However, we know from the following verses that Yudhiṣṭhira will eventually see Draupadī, Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhīma arrived in heaven ahead of him. Although he is tortured by a vision of them in hell, this is soon dismissed as having been illusory; Draupadī and the others were not in hell at all (18.3.34); the scene had been designed to test him "by fraud" (18.3.14-15). Hence Draupadī, Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhīma all reached heaven once they cast off their mortal bodies in the course of their wanderings (17.3.6).

Although the deaths of Draupadī and the younger Pāṇḍavas may indeed have a sense of *mahāprasthāna* to them, we may also be reminded here of the *yātsattra* texts which specify that anyone dying *en route* to the gate of heaven in the North nonetheless successfully completes the rite and reaches heaven all the same. Once again, I do not mean to suggest that the way Draupadī and the others die is a simply a narrative transposition from the *yātsattra*; the concept of *mahāprasthāna* also constitutes an important ritual framework against which these deaths are constructed. But if we entertain the notion that the authors of this episode were familiar with the *yātsattra* — a rite of walking to the door of heaven in the North, wherein death along the way constitutes the successful completion of the rite — the scenario becomes clearer than if we insist the Pāṇḍavas' deaths are simply a form of *mahāprasthāna*.

Another curious aspect of the narrative which the *sattra* may help to explain is Yudhiṣṭhira's testing. Twice in these short books he is examined or

inspected (*parīkṣita*: 17.3.18b; 18.3.31a; 18.3.32d). In the first case Yudhiṣṭhira debates with Indra about the dog, particularly over the issue of whether or not it is cruel to abandon the animal. Yudhiṣṭhira argues that it is unbecoming conduct for a Nobleman (*ārya*) to exhibit such heartlessness. After some remarks about why dogs are not permitted in heaven, Indra then attempts a finer argument: Yudhiṣṭhira has already abandoned his family along the way, as well as everything else in the world, and yet he refuses to let go of the dog. Indra adds: 'You are deluded! (*muhyase*, 17.3.13).' Yudhiṣṭhira counters: 'This is the way of the world: Neither friendship nor enmity between the dead and the living is possible. My brothers and Draupadī cannot be brought back to life, so I did not in fact abandon the living.' By sticking to his guns and outsmarting Indra's attempts to pin Yudhiṣṭhira down with spurious logic, he wins out over Indra and discovers that the dog has all along been a disguise of Dharma, the divine embodiment of Law and Righteousness. Dharma declares he is pleased with his son Yudhiṣṭhira and that he has passed the test.

A second test is the vision of his family in hell (preceded immediately by the exasperating vision of his enemy Duryodhana in heaven). Yudhiṣṭhira's compassionate nature is once again the key: for a second time he renounces heaven out of sympathy for his fellow creatures. However, the awful vision turns out to be illusory, and the whole scenario is called a test, the third of its kind (*eṣā tṛtīyā jijñāsā*: 18.3.30a).[145] Yudhiṣṭhira has passed this exam as well, and Dharma is pleased with his son because he cannot be made to deviate from his true nature by arguments (*na śakyase cālayituṁ svabhāvāt ... hetubhiḥ*, 18.3.30). The term *hetu* (argument, logic or reasoning) would seem an odd term to describe the tortuous vision of Draupadī, the Pāṇḍavas and their sons suffering in a stinking black hell. But what is going on here in these scenes is a testing (*parīkṣita*, *jijñāsā*), and as such a special emphasis is being placed on argument, debate and evaluation.

Once more I would like to suggest that those who composed the *Mahābhārata*'s final books may have been drawing on the imagery of the *sattra* rites. As we have seen above, arguments, challenges, and contests of wit are an important part of the *sattra* institution, both on the occasion of the inauguration of a session and during the intervals between *soma* pressings and other ritual activities. The stakes in such contests of wit are always high. Here at the *Mahābhārata*'s ending, the stake is higher even than life itself: it is no less than Yudhiṣṭhira's afterlife fate. He responds appropriately to the challenges, outwitting Indra and staying true to his principles, and is not swayed by "arguments" which push him to the limits of his understanding. Although the argument over the dog and the vision in hell may not appear to resemble a seated dialogue and test of wits as featured in the *sattra* rites, we should note that the text uses such terms as "examined" (*parīkṣita*), "test" (*jijñāsā*) and "argument" (*hetu*).

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[145] The first of the three tests took place years before in Dvaita forest: 3.295-298.

Yudhiṣṭhira succeeds (*nistīrṇavān asi*: 18.3.31d) and is thus allowed to proceed to heaven.

But unlike his family, Yudhiṣṭhira has not yet physically died. He has arrived in heaven in a sense as spectator and candidate, but once he has passed the tests must nonetheless exchange his mortal body for an immortal one before he can actually take up residence in paradise. To accomplish this, he must bathe in the Gaṅgā. Indra tells him: 'This is the pure river of the gods, O Pārtha, which purifies the three worlds. It is the Gaṅgā of the sky, O King. Having immersed yourself there, you will go [to heaven]. Your mortal nature will disappear once you have bathed here. You will be without sorrow, without trouble, your enmity released.' Dharma then steps in with some words of praise and repeats Indra's invitation: 'Come, come, eldest of the Bharatas, behold the Gaṅgā which traverses the three worlds.' Yudhiṣṭhira then submerges himself (*avagāhya*; *samāpluta*) in the River of the Gods, and renounces his mortal body (*tanuṁ tatyāja mānuṣīm*). He then takes on a heavenly form (*divyavapus*) and reaches heaven instantly.

Although the river in question here is the Gaṅgā and not the Yamunā or Sarasvatī, the image of Yudhiṣṭhira diving into the celestial river in order to reach heaven certainly seems to evoke the termination of the *yātsattra*. He casts off his mortal body once submerged (*avagāhya*; *samāpluta*) in the water. The river itself is said here to course through and purify the three worlds (usually thought to consist of earth, the mid-regions of space and the upper heavens, or alternately the underworlds, earth, and heaven) (*trailokyapāvanī*; *trilokagām*), and is called the "Gaṅgā of the sky" (*ākāśagaṅgā*). It is hard to dismiss the possibility that the image of the Milky Way is what the author has in mind, a river coursing down from the sky to touch the earth and flow into the land of mortals as a terrestrial river. We are reminded again of Witzel's claims about the astronomical significance of the Milky Way's movements for the *yātsattrin*, and of Eck's statement that "[t]he Gaṅgā is ... sometimes called *svarga-sopāna-sariṇī*, 'the flowing ladder to heaven.'"[146] Yudhiṣṭhira ascends this ladder in a manner appearing to accord with the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa*'s instructions for completing a *dārṣadvata yātsattra*: he bathes in the water and 'disappears' from mortals (25.13.4). We know already that one completing a *yātsattra* in this way reaches heaven, and it seems that the authors of the *Mahābhārata* knew this as well.

2.4. Conclusion

I hope it is now clear why I feel it may be rewarding to look at the events of books 17 and 18 from the perspective of the *sārasvata yātsattra*. On the one hand, our ritual reading has been inspired by the example of previous scholarship which has demonstrated that the structure and sequence of some of the *Mahābhārata*'s important narrative sequences can be fruitfully accounted for by hypothesizing

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[146] Eck, "India's 'Tīrthas': 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography," 324-325.

that their authors were in part following the models of Vedic rituals in their constructions of certain passages. As such I have taken heed of Oberlies' statement that it "seems promising *a priori* to interpret the story of the *Mahābhārata* in light of Vedic sacrificial ritual."[147] In addition, we have noted that the Vedic *sattra* sacrifices were a concern for those who consolidated the poem within the two frameworks of the Vaiśaṃpāyana-to-Janamejaya and Ugraśravas-to-Śaunaka narratives. Hence I have pursued here the possibility that the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion might also be profitably read in a similar way, and have argued that the authors of Books 17 and 18 were familiar with the rite of the *yātsattra* and incorporated some of its imagery and motifs into their account of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths.

Once again, I do not assert that the *sārasvata yātsattra* is simply a ritual blueprint upon which all the events of the *Mahāprasthānika-* and *Svargārohaṇaparvan*s are based. The purely geographic factor would preclude any such forcing, as there is no reference to the Sarasvatī river in Book 17 and 18 where the Pāṇḍavas' deaths are concerned. In addition, there is obviously more going on in these books than can be explained by pointing to the elements and structure of the *yātsattra*. Other frames of reference, such as the *mahāprasthāna*, are clearly part of the authors' understanding of what Yudhiṣṭhira and his family embark upon in their final days. One might also add that the sense of *saṃnyāsa* or renunciation is an important component of the Pāṇḍavas' last mortal act. All of these meanings are of course simultaneous and not competing. Furthermore, we will see in the following chapter that a second ritual — the *tīrthayātrā* or pilgrimage to the fording places — also has a special meaning for the authors of the poem's conclusion.

But the benefit of placing the *sārasvata yātsattra* alongside Books 17 and 18 is that it allows us to account for more elements of the books than the *prima facie* view that the Pāṇḍavas' deaths should be understood as a *mahāprasthāna*. Four factors prompt us towards the latter reading: Book 17's title, the single statement that Yudhiṣṭhira "set his mind upon *prasthāna*," the fact that the group proceeds on foot, and the fact that most of them die along the way. But we are then left asking: Why do they proceed North? What is the meaning of the encounter with Agni? Why is Bhīma scandalized by the deaths? Clearly his mind is not, like his elder brother, "set upon *prasthāna*;" but even Yudhiṣṭhira seems to confirm that these deaths are somehow failures connected with personal shortcomings, and thus seems to belie any notion that he intends the family to fatally exhaust themselves by walking. Meanwhile Yudhiṣṭhira, the central character of this episode, initially does not die at all, but arrives in heaven in his mortal body; subsequently he dies by drowning and ascends to heaven thereby. Such important details as these are not adequately explained by the *mahāprasthāna* model.

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[147] Oberlies, "Arjunas Himmelreise," 108.

If, however, we bring the motifs and structures of the *sārasvata yātsattra* to bear upon our understanding of these events, such elements take on a new significance; even the details that the group proceeds on foot, and that most of them die along the way, are accomodated in this reading. Once again, the salient details of the ritual complex in question are as follows: the *sārasvata yātsattra* is a wandering ritual sacrifice, carried out along the Sarasvatī river, which is concluded up in the northern mountains. The participants band together as a collective under the leadership of a *sthapati* and, together with their wives, advance northwards on foot, making daily offerings to Agni. When they reach the confluence of the Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī, an offering must be made to the God of Waters before they can proceed past this obstacle. Pressing North and up into the mountains, the participants terminate the rite and may end their lives by drowning at Kārapacana; in doing so they attain heaven. However, those who have died along the way have also successfully completed the rite and attained heaven as well.

Reading the narrative of Books 17 and 18 against this Vedic backdrop, we find that all of the following details may be taken under a single interpretive ritual framework: The solidarity of the group together with their wife under the lead of Yudhiṣṭhira; the theme of walking northwards on foot to the gate of heaven; the encounter with Agni at the Lauhitya and the offering to Varuṇa, the epic God of Waters; the individual deaths of each family member: Draupadī and the younger Pāṇḍavas do not reach their goal on foot like Yudhiṣṭhira, but their purpose is accomplished all the same. Yudhiṣṭhira's prodding and testing also may reflect some of the *sattra* culture of debate and high-stakes interrogation. But perhaps the most striking element of all is Yudhiṣṭhira's death: after his ascent into the northern mountains, he drowns in a river and rises instantly to heaven. All of these elements of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion can be provided with a common backdrop or frame of reference if we entertain the possibility that the *sārsavata yātsattra* was familiar to the authors of *parvans* 17 and 18.

I will return, then, to this simple point at the heart of this dissertation: a sensitivity to Vedic themes and motifs is necessary in order for us to understand the motivation behind the construction of particular moments of the poem's narrative. Such themes are easily overlooked, for indeed the poem often seems to present us with a thoroughly *kṣatriya* or warriors' tale, and is in principle disconnected from the Veda or *śruti* in virtue of its classification as a *smṛti*. But as I have stated above, many important continuities between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata* have now been brought to light and investigated in epic scholarship; I hope to have shown in this chapter that such an approach can greatly enrich our understanding of the epic's final scenes.

As we conclude our discussion of the *sārasvata yātsattra*'s significance for the epic's conclusion, two questions must be raised that are still in need of resolution: what, if any, is the relationship between the Pāṇḍavas' circumambulation of the earth in Book 17 and the *yātsattra*? And if the *sārasvata yātsattra* is colouring the account of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths, why does Yudhiṣṭhira

dive into the Gaṅgā river and not the Sarasvatī? In the following chapter, we will examine the relationship between the *sārasvata yātsattra* and the institution of pilgrimage or *tīrthayātrā* as it is understood in the *Mahābhārata*. In doing so, we will be able to answer these questions and extend further the Vedic ritual reading of Books 17 and 18.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0. Introduction

Above in section 1.1.1. we noted that the Pāṇḍavas, prior to their final ascent into the northern mountains, perform a huge (albeit briefly related) walking tour of the earth (17.1.41cd-17.2.2). After first heading East (*prāṅmukhāḥ*, 17.1.27d),

> ... those heroic Pāṇḍavas went facing South. Then they went, O tiger of the Bharatas, to the South-West region by means of the northern bank of the Ocean of Salt Water (Lavaṇāmbhas). Then, turned again to the western region, they saw Dvārakā flooded by the ocean. Those best of the Bharatas, possessed of the *dharma* of *yoga*, having returned again to the North, went on, intending to circumambulate the earth. Then those self-controlled ones, joined to *yoga*, [who were] going towards the northern region, saw the great mountain Himavat. And then, going beyond even that [Himavat], they saw a desert. They perceived the great mountain Meru, the most prominent of [mountain] tops.[148]

The only motivation we find in the text for this long detour is that the Pāṇḍavas "desire[d] to carry out a circumambulation of the earth" (*prādakṣiṇyaṁ cikīrṣantaḥ pṛthivyā[ḥ]*). Why this undertaking should immediately precede their ascension to heaven is not clear at first sight. I have argued above that the *sārasvata yātsattra* forms an important frame of reference for the authors of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion. Does this tour of the earth have anything to do with the *sārasvata yātsattra*? Is this gesture of circumambulating the earth known elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*?

At first glance, their tour may be seen simply as an act of reverence to the earth, this being suggested by the term *pradakṣiṇaṁ / prādakṣiṇyaṁ* — lit. "with right side forth" — that is, moving around an object such that one's right side (the auspicious, "pure" side) is facing the object. In this case the object is North-Central India or Āryāvarta, and it is circumambulated by an East-South-West-North trajectory, just as one would circumambulate a temple or other sacred object today. But in the *Mahābhārata*, this clockwise movement is not limited to the veneration of objects and persons. The sun's intinerary, for example, is understood to be made up of an East-South-West route above the earth (the "day

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[148] *yayuś ca pāṇḍavā vīrās tatas te dakṣiṇāmukhāḥ* ‖ 17.1.41cd
tatas te tūttareṇaiva tīreṇa lavaṇāmbhasaḥ | jagmur bharataśārdūla diśaṁ dakṣiṇapaścimam ‖ 42
tataḥ punaḥ samāvṛttāḥ paścimāṁ diśam eva te | dadṛśur dvārakāṁ cāpi sāgareṇa pariplutām ‖
43 *udīcīṁ punar āvṛttya yayur bharatasattamāḥ | prādakṣiṇyaṁ cikīrṣantaḥ pṛthivyā*
yogadharmiṇaḥ ‖ 44 (end of *adhyāya* 17.1) *tatas te niyatātmāna udīcīṁ diśam āsthitāḥ | dadṛśur*
yogayuktāś ca himavantaṁ mahāgirim ‖ 17.2.1 *taṁ cāpy atikramantas te dadṛśur vālukārṇavam |*
avaikṣanta mahāśailaṁ meruṁ śikhariṇāṁ varam ‖ 2

sun") and West-North-East route below (the "night sun").[149] The sun-wise pattern, always suggesting a kind of spacial or geographic totality, is also found in the undertaking of the *digvijaya* or military conquest of the known world.[150]

Most significant for us, however, is the *Mahābhārata*'s presentation of the *tīrthayātrā* or institution of pilgrimage to the holy fording places (*tīrthas*), which also takes up this clockwise sequence of visiting the four cardinal points. Below I will argue that, despite the absence of the term *tīrthayātrā* or "pilgrimage tour," or any reference to *tīrthas* (sacred fords) in Book 17, the Pāṇḍavas' final *pradakṣiṇa* or circumambulation of the earth should be understood as a *tīrthayātrā*. Or, to phrase it more precisely, their circling the known world in Book 17 is best understood in relation to the *Mahābhārata*'s other significant accounts of pilgrimage, of which there are three: Arjuna's pilgrimage by himself in the *Ādiparvan* (1.206-210), the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage during Arjuna's absence in the *Āraṇyakaparvan* (3.80-172), and Baladeva's pilgrimage up the Sarasvatī river in the *Śalyaparvan* (9.33-53).[151] The principal concern of this chapter is to define the relationship of the Pāṇḍavas' final sun-wise tour of the earth to the institution of *tīrthayātrā* as represented in these three pilgrimage accounts, particularly the 3.80-172 section, and offer thereby a hypothesis as to why the authors of Book 17 chose to precede the Pāṇḍavas' *svargārohaṇa* or ascension to heaven with a tour around Āryāvarta or North-Central India.

The Vedic rite of the *sārasvata yātsattra* discussed in the preceding chapter will continue to play an important role here, and so we will see once again that in order to fully appreciate what is taking place in the poem's final scenes, it is necessary to understand how the themes and structures of Vedic ritual have helped to shape the epic's narrative. In this chapter we will in a sense extend the arguments of chapter 2 regarding the structuring role of the *sārasvata yātsattra* on the narrative of these books. For, as I will suggest below, the *Mahābhārata*'s representation of the act of pilgrimage builds in part upon the model of the *sārasvata yātsattra*. One of the *Mahābhārata*'s three pilgrimage accounts is similar to a *sārasvata yātsattra*, while the other two make the *tīrthayātrā* a "sun-wise tour" of the earth (*pradakṣiṇaṁ pṛthivīṁ* + √*kṛ*) or clockwise "para-Āryāvarta" tour much like that undertaken by the Pāṇḍavas in Book 17. The relationship between the ritual forms of the *sārasvata yātsattra* and the circumambulatory *tīrthayātrā* is thus of immediate concern for our understanding

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[149] See, for example, *Mahābhārata* 3.160.4-37.

[150] The Pāṇḍavas themselves undertake just such a conquest at 2.23-29; each brother conquers a cardinal point individually while Yudhiṣṭhira stays in Indraprastha. The four conquests are described in a clockwise pattern, but the sequence begins with the North and terminates with the West.

[151] The character Ambā also visits some *tīrthas* in Book 5 (5.187.23-28), but this passage is very short and for the most part is concerned with *āśramas* of various sages. In the *Mausalaparvan*, Kṛṣṇa expedites the final destruction of his clan by sending them on a *tīrthayātrā* to Prabhāsa (16.3.21-22, 16.4.5-6). A list of *tīrthas* also occurs (approximately 60 verses) at 13.26.

of the narrative of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths and will be examined closely in this chapter.

We should note at the outset that the concept of visiting holy sites in order to accumulate merit most certainly developed independently of, and is merely reflected in, the *Mahābhārata*. But our interest is with the epic text alone, and so while I may occasionally make reference to existing traditions of Indian pilgrimage today, I do not propose a study of the institution as such, but simply a look at its representation or construction in the *Mahābhārata*.[152] We can therefore limit ourselves to a few key premises bearing on the *Mahābhārata*'s likely chronological placement in the actual development of the instutution of pilgrimage on the ground in India: (1) Vedic literature, which on the whole can be safely dated well before the *Mahābhārata* of the 4th or 5th century CE (i.e. as we have the epic more or less today), offers no systematic accounts of *tīrthayātrā* nor organized lists of sacred fords (*tīrthas*); (2) the basic concept of visiting *tīrthas* is attested in early post-Vedic texts,[153] but it is the *Mahābhārata* itself which offers the earliest representation of systematic pilgrimage and lists of *tīrthas*;[154] (3) descriptions of pilgrimage *per se* and lists of *tīrthas* abound in the *Purāṇas*, which are notoriously difficult to date and almost always assigned dates much later than the epics.[155]

Our hypothesis below respects this broad developmental outline: section 3.1. will examine the three pilgrimage accounts, beginning with Baladeva's (9.34-53), arguing that it is based on the Vedic model of the *sārasvata yātsattra* and as such may represent an earlier conception or construction of *tīrthayātrā* in the *Mahābhārata*. I will suggest that, as the other two *tīrtha* tours (the Pāṇḍavas', without Arjuna, in 3.80-172 and Arjuna's in 1.206-210) reflect the purāṇic model of *tīrthayātrā* by extending the geographical domain in cardinal sequence, they may represent later accounts. Section 3.2. then ties the *Mahābhārata*'s two final books to these pilgrimage passages, particularly the account of Book 3 and argues that we should understand the Pāṇḍavas' final *pradakṣiṇa* of the earth as a gesture recalling this earlier pilgrimage tour.

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[152] It is for this reason that I will not pursue the issue of Indian Buddhist pilgrimage here (a tradition likely reaching back to the time of the *Mahābhārata*'s composition), since the *Mahābhārata* seems to lack any clear and direct references to Buddhist culture.

[153] "Yāska's *Nirukta* [cir. 700 - 500 BCE] does not list pilgrimage among the meanings of *yātrā* (Skr. for 'travel'), although this word became the most frequent term for pilgrimage in later times ... The law teacher Gautama (*ca.* 200 B.C.), however, declares 'all mountians, all rivers, holy lakes, *tīrthas* (places of pilgrimage) the abodes of seers, cow-pens and temples of gods are sin-destroying localities [*Gautamīya Śāstra* XIX,14].'" Bharati, "Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition," 137.

[154] "[T]he *Mahābhārata* is the oldest and the most important source of information about the places of pilgrimage in the ancient period." Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage: A Study in Cultural Geography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 29.

[155] The *Rāmāyaṇa*, always a text inviting comparison with the *Mahābhārata*, is also well populated by *tīrtha* sites, but there is nothing comparable in the epic of Rāma to the *Mahābhārata*'s extensive and systematic pilgrimage accounts found at 3.80-172 and 9.33-53.

I will trace this development in order to support the following claim: The author of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion preceded the deaths of the Pāṇḍavas with a circumambulatory *tīrthayātrā* because this latter rite was associated in the epic text with the Vedic rite of the *sārasvata yātsattra*, meritorious drowning and heavenly ascension. As we saw in chapter 2, the *yātsattrin* or participant in this rite ascends the Sarasvatī river in order to attain heaven; he may die along the way, or may drown himself in the river's head-waters — both will bring him instantly to heaven. Baladeva's pilgrimage in Book 9 of the *Mahābhārata* appears to take this rite as its model, while the Pāṇḍavas' tour in Book 3 seems to draw, at least in part, from the Book 9 account, and preserves the *sārasvata yātsattra*'s motif of the attainment of heaven by drowning. At the end of the *Mahābhārata*, the Pāṇḍavas perform this rite according to the broader sun-wise circuit, and ascend to heaven by dying *en route* or, in Yudhiṣṭhira's case, drowning in the Gaṅgā river. Although the circumambulatory *tīrthayātrā*, evoked in the closing scenes of the poem, was itself was not a Vedic institution, it nonetheless bears an important family relationship to the Vedic *sārasvata yātsattra* within the text of the *Mahābhārata*. Hence I hope to illustrate here, as in chapter 2, some of the ways that Vedic culture has helped to shape the poem, and that once again we must pay close attention to this Vedic aspect of the epic if we are to understand the configuration and content of the epic's final scenes.

3.1.0. Three Accounts of Pilgrimage in the *Mahābhārata*

In section 3.1, we will review the *Mahābhārata*'s three principal *tīrthayātrā* passages. Briefly, the narrative sequence of the three is as follows: Arjuna violates a family contract and consequently spends a year on his own carrying out a pilgrimage (1.206-210); later, after the Pāṇḍavas are exiled to the forest, Arjuna strikes off by himself yet again and the remaining Pāṇḍavas go on a pilgrimage tour of their own, reuniting with Arjuna on Gandhamādana mountain (3.80-172). After the Pāṇḍavas' thirteenth year of exile in disguise, the attempts to broker peace fail and war is declared, whereupon Baladeva, the elder brother of Kṛṣṇa, departs on a pilgrimage, returning on the last day of the war to witness the final fight between Bhīma and Duryodhana (9.34-53). We will not examine these three accounts in the order in which they occur in the epic, but rather begin with the third, as it reflects what I will argue is likely an older conception or construction of the act of pilgrimage, given that it is based on the model of the Vedic *sārasvata yātsattra*. Taking up a hypothesis of Andreas Bigger, I will then argue that the *Mahābhārata*'s other two pilgrimage accounts, which develop the pilgrim's circuit out to encompass all of Āryāvarta in a clockwise sequence, may represent later conceptions of *tīrthayātrā* which carry over some of the important elements we find in the Book 9 section.

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3.1.1. Baladeva's *tīrthayātrā* (9.34-53)

Baladeva,[156] Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa's elder brother, undertakes his trip instead of participating in the great battle. Upon hearing, in Book 5, that war between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas is inevitable, Baladeva declares he will not take sides since he is tied equally to both camps. Instead he decides "to go see the *tīrthas* of the Sarasvatī river (*tīrthāni sarasvatyā niṣevitum*)." The proposed journey is here called a *tīrthayātrā* (5.154.32-33), as well as in the later section wherein the tour is actually described (9.34.12; 9.34.15; 9.34.18; 9.42.4). Baladeva's trip up the Sarasvatī river takes place during the battle, "behind the scenes" of Books 6-8 as it were, and is not actually recounted until the conclusion of the great war in Book 9. After the war is over, Baladeva returns from his trip to witness the final club match between his two students Duryodhana and Bhīma, and upon his arrival the story of the club-battle is paused while Vaiśaṁpāyana, the narrator of the *Mahābhārata*, explains to his principal auditor Janamejaya all the details of Baladeva's *tīrthayātrā*.

  Baladeva's pilgrimage is fairly straightforward: he follows the Sarasvatī river upstream from the mouth to the source, visiting all the meritorious fording places (*tīrthas*) along the way. This is, as we will see, a much simpler undertaking than the sub-continent-wide itinerary of the epic's other two tours. While Baladeva's trip is much like a *sārasvata yātsattra*, his journey is called a *tīrthayātrā*. This has led Andreas Bigger to claim:

> I am convinced that the *sarasvatīsattra* is one of the fore-runners of the classical *tīrthayātrā*, even if one can no longer reconstruct the stages of development between the *sarasvatīsattra* and the *tīrthayātrā*. In the *Mahābhārata*, Baladeva's pilgrimage shows itself to be so closely related to the *sarasvatīsattra* that it must be influenced by it. (...) Baladeva's *tīrthayātrā* is surely not a *sarasvatīsattra* in the strict sense, but the latter rather serves as the model of the former...[157]

  The first and most obvious element suggesting that this pilgrimage is indeed modeled on the older Vedic rite of the *sārasvata yātsattra* is of course the itinerary: Baladeva follows the Sarasvatī river upstream (facing eastwards — 9.36.32c) along the southern bank (9.36.28d) to the source of the river, Plakṣa Prasravaṇa (9.53.11b). The geography of Baladeva's journey differs from a *sārasvata yātsattra* only insofar as the Vedic texts define Vinaśana as the starting point, while Baladeva's is Prabhāsa (see above, Fig.2, page 57). The Sarasvatī flows all the way to the Arabian Sea, becoming "invisible," that is to say

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  [156] See above, note 47.

  [157] Bigger, "Wege und Umwege," 158. Hiltebeitel also states that "Balarāma's pilgrimage is a yātsattra refitted to epic ends..." (*Rethinking the* Mahābhārata), 140.

disappearing underground, at Vinaśana (lit. "disappearance"), and reappearing at Udapāna (or the reverse when viewed from the perspective of one ascending the river upstream). Udapāna is in the immediate vicinity of Camasodbheda (9.34.78), and hence both sites are also associated with the "disappearance" of the river. Baladeva begins at the sea-side location of Prabhāsa and ends the long walk up in the mountains at Plakṣa Prasravaṇa and Kārapacana (9.53.9-11), the site defined as the terminal bathing place for a *sārasvata yātsattrin* in the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* and other ritual texts. Concerning this circuit, Bigger observes that "[i]nsofar as Baladeva's pilgrimage follows the route of the *sarasvatīsattra*, it derives its legitimacy from this ritual, just as the *tīrtha*s he visits derive their legitimacy from the legends which recall the ascetics who had visited there, or the Vedic rites that had taken place there."[158]

Another aspect of Baladeva's tour that suggests his pilgrimage is modelled on the *sārasvata yātsattra*, is the set of figures offered for the timing and duration of the journey. The *Mahābhārata* war lasts for eighteen days (1.2.234; 9.23.16; 11.13.8), and begins, as does Baladeva's *tīrthayātrā*, on the day called Puṣya.[159] When Baladeva's tour is recounted in Book 9, we find this calendrical specification of Puṣya for the start of both the battle and Baladeva's journey (9.33.5c; 9.34.9d). But while Baladeva leaves on the first day of the war and returns on the eighteenth, he declares upon his return that he has been gone for forty-two days (*catvāriṁśad ahāny adya dve ca me niḥsṛtasya vai*, 9.33.5ab), specifying that the trip extended from the day of Puṣya to the day of Śravaṇa (*puṣyeṇa samprayāto 'smi śravaṇe punar āgataḥ*, 9.33.5cd).[160] The figures of eighteen days for the battle and forty-two for Baladeva's concurrent pilgrimage stand in conflict with each other.[161]

In his extensive study on the figure of Baladeva in the *Mahābhārata*, Bigger accounts for this timing problem by suggesting it was either unnoticed by or unimportant to the author.[162] Although Bigger's concern is to demonstrate that the *sārasvata yātsattra* stood as the model for Baladeva's pilgrimage, he misses an important point here that may offer further support for his hypothesis. Forty-two days is of course not likely enough time to walk the roughly 1300 kilometers from Prabhāsa to Plakṣa Prasravaṇa, but calculations as to what may or may not be likely need not be brought into the discussion. Instead we should ask where the

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[158] Ibid.

[159] On the first day of battle, Bhīṣma commands his eleven armies to assemble: 'All of you go forth to Kuru Field, today is Puṣya! (*prayādhvaṁ vai kurukṣetraṁ puṣyo 'dyeti* - 5.148.3).'

[160] Puṣya is the 8th of 27 asterisms in the calendar, Śravaṇa the 22nd. From Puṣya to Śravaṇa is 15 days, plus another entire cycle through all 27, makes 42 days. For a short outline of astronomical and calendrical figures see A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 489-495.

[161] "It is quite impossible to reconcile this [term of 42 days] with the statements in regard to the length of the battle (eighteen days) found elsewhere in the epic." E.W. Hopkins, "Epic Chronology." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 24 (1903): 53.

[162] Andreas Bigger, *Balarāma im Mahābhārata: seine Darstellung im Rahmen des Textes und seiner Entwicklung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 52.

figure of forty-two days may come from, since the figure of eighteen days for the great battle is well-known in the *Mahābhārata*. A possible answer presents itself if we recall that the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* specifies that the *sārasvata yātsattra* journey from Vinaśana to Plakṣa Prasravaṇa takes forty-four days on horseback.[163] Of course the *Mahābhārata*'s figure of forty-two days and the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa*'s of forty-four do not match precisely, but given that both texts are concerned with defining a journey up the Sarasvatī river, it makes sense to suspect that the author of *Mahābhārata* 9.34-53 may have had such a text as the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* in mind when specifying the length of Baladeva's journey.[164] The precedent set by the ritual texts of the *sārasvata yātsattra* regarding the time needed to ascend the Sarasvatī river could well explain why the author might force the incongruent figure of forty-two upon or behind that of eighteen elsewhere given for the great war.

A third element linking Baladeva's pilgrimage to the *sārasvata yātsattra* is the motif of meritorious self-imposed death by drowning. In the preceding chapter we took note of the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa*'s statement that the *sattrin* bathing at Kārapacana (the terminal point of the *sārasvata* and *dārṣadvata yātsattras*) "disappears from men." Successfully completing the ritual in this way, the *sattrin* then attains heaven directly. The passage is understood by later commentators as well as contemporary scholarship to refer to suicide by drowning.[165]

While Baladeva does not drown himself in taking his final bath at Kārapacana, the theme of drowning-suicide leading immediately to heaven appears several times in the course of Baladeva's journey. For every ford Baladeva visits along the Sarasvatī, a story is recounted about why it is special. In several cases, the fame of the place is connected with people who "cast off the body" there and attained heaven directly. For example, immediately following a well-known site called Kapālamocana, Baladeva visits the hermitage of Ruṣaṅgu, who "cast off his body (*ruṣaṅgus tanum atyajat*, 9.38.23)" after declaring: "Anyone who, devoted to repeating prayers, would throw off the body here at Pṛthūdaka on the Sarasvatī's North bank, will never be grieved by this [fear of] impending death (*sarasvaty uttare tīre yas tyajed ātmanas tanum | pṛthūdake japyaparo nainaṁ śvomaraṇaṁ tapet ǁ 9.38.29*)." Later at a *tīrtha* called Vasiṣṭhāpavāham, we are told that some *rākṣasas* went to heaven, having bathed there and cast off their bodies (9.42.25). Later, at the site of Badarapācana, the story of Indra and Srucāvatī is told, wherein Indra advises the young woman that all who renounce their body there attain *deva*-hood (9.47.15); she is promised co-dwelling with Indra if she casts off her body there (9.47.26). Indra then declares

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[163] *catuścatvāriṁśadāśvīnāni sarasvatyā vinaśanāt plakṣaḥ prāsravaṇas tāvaditaḥ svargo lokaḥ sarasvatīsammitenādhvanā svargaṁ lokaṁ yanti | Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa*, 25.12.16.

[164] Bigger pointed out to me (personal communication, October 2007) that the two missing days can be accounted for if one accomodates the day of departure and day of return, between which Baladeva has been gone (*niḥsṛta*).

[165] See chap. 2, 99-101.

that this particular *tīrtha* will lead directly to the hard-won worlds of heaven for anyone spending one night and then casting off his or her body there (9.47.51).

Clearly the ritual texts of the *sārasvata yātsattra* are not alone in defining the Sarasvatī as a good place to die. The meritorious locations, however, now seem to be multiplying and appearing downstream from Plakṣa Prasravaṇa. Baladeva himself sings a verse of praise to the Sarasvatī once his pilgrimage is over, which is suggestive of this special feature of the river: "People, having reached the Sarasvatī, have gone to heaven (*sarasvatīṃ prāpya divaṃ gatā janāḥ*, 9.53.34)." If the authors of Baladeva's pilgrimage were drawing on the model of the *sārasvata yātsattra*, as seems likely given the geography and odd detail of the time required for Baladeva to complete the journey, we should not be surprised to find repeated in Book 9 the *yātsattra* motif of a meritorious, heaven-winning suicide by drowning. Baladeva of course does not actually drown himself when he reaches the top of the river at Plakṣa Prasravaṇa and Kārapacana,[166] but we do find that the motif of drowning oneself in the Sarasvatī in order to reach heaven occuring earlier in his journey at various points along the river.

In concluding our look at Baladeva's pilgrimage we might do well to recall certain details of the important pilgrimage site of Prayāga as we know it today. These details from contemporary religious practice of course offer no direct evidence for our discussion of the *Mahābhārata*, but are quite conspicuous given the preceding discussion of the Sarasvatī river and Baladeva's *tīrthayātrā*. One element is the motif of liberating ritual suicide or self-imposed death by drowning, which is still practiced today at the Kumbha Melā of Prayāga every twelve years. The only difference is that the contemporary pilgrim drowning at Prayāga (at the right time) is said to achieve instant *mokṣa* or final emancipation and not instant *svarga* or heaven, as in the case of the Vedic *sārasvata yātsattra* and several fords of the Sarasvatī visited by Baladeva. But the holiness of Prayāga which makes it so meritorious for all who die there, is due not only to the auspicious confluence of the Ganges and Yamunā, but the Sarasvatī river as well. While the Sarasvatī of Vedic times did not flow anywhere near Prayāga, and in any case has long since dried up, the Sarasvatī is today understood to flow underground and meet the confluence of the Yamunā and Gaṅgā at Prayāga. This long-standing conception of an invisible underground Sarasvatī would seem to

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[166] On this point Bigger offers an interesting observation: immediately after Baladeva's final bath at Kārapacana, the sage Nārada admonishes Baladeva to return to Kurukṣetra. Baladeva has just heard, in the course of his journey, that all who die in battle on Kurukṣetra attain directly to heaven (9.52.6). Armed with this information, and goaded by Nārada, he returns to find Bhīma and Duryodhana about to begin their club battle; the fight is moved over to Kuru Plain, since all who die there go straight to heaven (9.54.5-8). Duryodhana is soon defeated in the club fight, and does indeed attain heaven. Hence, Bigger argues, the theme of "die-here-and-go-to-heaven" which marks the termination of the *sārasvata yātsattra* also marks the termination of Baladeva's rite as well, only now in a military context. Baladeva's journey up the river does not end in the attainment of heaven for him, but rather for his student Duryodhana, for whom he has "prepared the way" (Bigger, "Wege und Umwege," 160).

recall the river's "underground disappearance" at Vinaśana, the site specified for the initial consecration in the ritual texts of the *sārasvata yātsattra*. The motifs from Prayāga's contemporary pilgrimage mythology — the invisible, underground Sarasvatī and instant redemption for all who drown there — provide curious parallels to the *Mahābhārata*'s representation of pilgrimage, and would seem to support the claim of a close tie between the *sārasvata yātsattra* and Baladeva's *tīrthayātrā* proposed here.

Thus far I have attempted to demonstrate that Baladeva's pilgrimage in part models itself on the *sārasvata yātsattra*. I would agree with Andreas Bigger and suggest that the geography, awkward but significant calculations as to the duration of Baladeva's journey, and the merits of drowning-suicide resulting in the attainment of heaven all point to the *sattra* along the Sarasvatī river as a kind of paradigm for Baladeva's peaceful war-time activities. Once again, I do not mean to suggest that the actual institution of pilgrimage in India arose directly from the old Vedic rite of the *yātsattra*. Rather, the authors of Baladeva's Sarasvatī pilgrimage took the *sārasvata yātsattra* as their model in framing or constructing the activity of visiting the sacred fords, which had no doubt come to be a popular religious undertaking prior to and during the time of the *Mahābhārata*'s composition. What is of interest to us is the way the *tīrthayātrā* is conceived in the *Mahābhārata*, and the way in which, in the case of Baladeva's tour, it is deployed in the construction of a newer, post-Vedic religious undertaking.

Before turning to the poem's other two pilgrimage accounts, we should mention an important detail from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* pointed out by Bigger.[167] In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.78-79 (a text later than the *Mahābhārata*),[168] Baladeva's pilgrimage during the Mahābhārata war is recounted, but there he follows not the Sarasvatī river route, but the sun-wise tour of the earth as found in the *Mahābhārata*'s other two *tīrthayātrās*. Unlike the *Mahābhārata*, Baladeva in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* performs a *pradakṣiṇa* of the entire land of Bhārata (10.78.40), carrying out the *tīrthayātrā* in an East-South-West pattern, returning to the North to witness the club battle at Kurukṣetra (10.79.23). This extra-*Mahābhārata* source gives an indication of the trend in the development of the ideal *tīrthayātrā* proposed by Bigger and pursued here.

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[167] Bigger, "Wege und Umwege," 161, note 44.

[168] See Wendy Doniger, "Echoes of the *Mahābhārata*: Why is a Parrot the Narrator of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*?" in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 32.

3.1.2. The Pāṇḍavas' *tīrthayātrā* (without Arjuna) (3.80-172)

This section of the *Āraṇyakaparvan* is the longest of the *Mahābhārata*'s pilgrimage passages, and is the most important of the three for our treatment of Books 17 and 18. It is made up of two lists of pilgrimage sites (3.80-83 and 3.85-88), followed by the Pāṇḍavas' actual tour (3.89-139). The end of the tour is marked by an ascent up Mount Gandhamādana in the North (3.140-172). This entire set of 92 *adhyāyas* shows clear signs of reworking, but for the most part we will handle the entire section as a unit.

At this stage of the epic narrative, the Pāṇḍavas have undertaken the exile stipulated for the loser of the dice match: 12 years must be spent wandering in the forest (these years are recounted in Book 3, the *Āraṇyakaparvan*) and the 13th year is to be spent in disguise "among people." Not long after they begin their 12 years of wandering, Arjuna breaks off from the family in order to search for magical weapons which they will surely need once they return from exile. Yudhiṣṭhira and his family are despondent without Arjuna, but immediately after his departure, they are visited by the sage Nārada. Yudhiṣṭhira wastes no time in asking: "What is the fruit for one who, fully intent upon the sacred fording places, does a circumambulation of the earth (*pradakṣiṇaṁ yaḥ kurute pṛthivīṁ tīrthatatparaḥ | kiṁ phalaṁ tasya ...* 3.80.10)?" By way of reply, Nārada relays to Yudhiṣṭhira a dialogue between Bhīṣma and Pulastya wherein the latter enumerated all the great *tīrthas* or places of pilgrimage (3.80.41-3.83.83). This is the first of the two lists of *tīrthas*. Nārada then promises the Pāṇḍavas that the sage Lomaśa will arrive soon and lead them on an actual pilgrimage tour. Shortly thereafter, Dhaumya, the domestic priest of the Pāṇḍavas, offers the second list of *tīrthas* (3.85-88). Lomaśa arrives as promised and leads the Pāṇḍavas on an actual tour of the purifying sites (3.89-139). The tour then turns North toward Gandhamādana mountain, where the Pāṇḍavas will be reunited with Arjuna (3.140-153). A short *adhyāya* follows wherein Bhīma kills a hostile imposter among their group (3.154), and the text then repeats the entire account of the ascent up Mount Gandhamādana all over again (3.155-162).[169] Finally, the family is reunited with Arjuna who returns from Indra's heaven equipped with new magical weapons and stories of his deeds in the upper worlds (3.163-172).

The material of 3.80-139 as a whole naturally has much in common with the *tīrthayātrā* of 9.34-53 where the Sarasvatī river is concerned and the associated elements of the *sārasvata yātsattra* upon which the account of Baladeva's pilgrimage appears to build. The course of the river is the same in the Book 3 section as in Baladeva's tour: the Sarasvatī begins at Plakṣa Prasravaṇa / Plakṣāvataraṇa, "disappears" at Vinaśana (3.80.118; 3.130.3-4), "reappears" at Camasodbheda (3.80.119; 3.130.5) and enters the ocean at the *tīrtha* of Prabhāsa

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[169] This repetition of the Gandhamādana ascent is especially indicative of the 3.80-172 section's reworking. See especially Reinhold Grünedahl, "Zu den beiden Gandhamādana-Episoden des Āraṇyakaparvan." *Studien Zur Indologie und Iranistik* 18 (1993): 103-138.

(3.80.79-80). The source of the river is especially important in the 3.80-139 account, and is referred to simply as Plakṣa or Plakṣāvataraṇa. In Nārada's (Pulastya's) list of *tīrthas*, for example, we find mention of the "Sarasvatī flowing from Plakṣa (3.82.5);" Dhaumya's list also places the *tīrtha* called Plakṣāvataraṇa on the Sarasvatī (3.88.3). The proximity of Plakṣa Prasravaṇa to the Yamunā, attested in the Vedic literature of the *sārasvata yātsattra* and in Baladeva's tour, is preserved here as well: when the pilgrims actually arrive there, Lomaśa tells them that Plakṣāvataraṇa is a ford of the Yamunā, and that "this is the door to the back of heaven (*nākapṛṣṭha*, 3.129.14)." Here there seems to be a conflation of the Sarasvatī's source Plakṣa Prasravaṇa / Plakṣāvataraṇa with the site of Kārapacana on the Yamunā, which is said in the Vedic texts and Baladeva's Sarasvatī *tīrthayātrā* to be in the immediate vicinity of Plakṣa Prasravaṇa, and which serves as the *avabhṛtha* or final bathing site for a *sārasvata* or *dārṣadvata yātsattrin*.[170] All the details regarding the Sarasvatī which are mentioned during the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage or in its two preceding lists of *tīrthas* match those found in Book 9. Eighteen fords of the Sarasvatī are mentioned in both 3.80-83 and 9.34-53, and are all in the same sequence, with two exceptions.[171]

    In addition to sharing the geography and place-names of the Sarasvatī with the Baladeva account, the Book 3 section also preserves, in its pilgrimage mythology of the Sarasvatī, details from the rite of the *sārasvata yātsattra* such as the throwing of the *śamyā* peg, which, we will recall, is the *yātsattrin*'s way of measuring out his daily advance along the river. The distance between two particular fords on the Sarasvatī is measured in throws of the *śamyā* peg at 3.82.7, and Dhaumya's list of fords specifies the Sarasvatī as the place "where Sahadeva sacrificed by throwing the *śamyā* peg (3.88.4)." When arrived at the Sarasvatī's head-waters, the Pāṇḍavas are told that this is the place "where the foremost *ṛṣis*, equipped with *yūpas* (sacrificial posts) and *ulūkhalas* (mortars) celebrated with *sārasvata* sacrifices and went for the final *avabhṛtha* bath (3.129.14)."

    As in the case of Baladeva's *sārasvata tīrthayātrā*, the motif of heaven-winning drowning-suicide in the Sarasvatī river also appears quite clearly in the 3.80-139 section. As we might expect, this is emphasized most at the river's head-waters. Lomaśa explains to Yudhiṣṭhira that there the gods "sacrificed with the *sārasvata* rites (3.129.21)," and states "Here [at the source of the Sarasvatī], mortals undertaking penances go to heaven, O Bhārata; men desiring to die come here by the thousands, O king. Here formerly was spoken by Dakṣa the sublime blessing: 'All men who die here will indeed win heaven.' (3.130.1-2)."[172] And as in the case of 9.34-53, sites further down the Sarasvatī are also appropriate places for committing suicide. At Pṛthudaka, for example, anyone casting off the body

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[170] See above, note 131.

[171] Oberlies, "Die Ratschläge des Sehers Nārada," 136.

[172] *iha martyās tapas taptvā svargaṁ gacchanti bhārata | martukāmā narā rājann ihāyānti sahasraśaḥ || evam āsīḥ prayuktā hi dakṣeṇa yajatā purā | iha ye vai mariṣyanti te vai svargajito narāḥ ||*

on the northern bank of the Sarasvatī, escapes the fear of death (3.81.126). This verse corresponds almost verbatim to the verse describing the same site during Baladeva's tour (9.38.29). Hence the material of the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage tour is no less concerned to define the Sarasvatī as a place from which heaven can be accessed by those brave enough to throw themselves into her waters.

Although the 3.80-139 section does not limit itself to the Sarasvatī, there is clearly much in common between its mythology of the river and the mythology found in Baladeva's account, and both clearly associate the river with the *sārasvata yātsattra*. This may suggest that the Book 3 account drew some of its material from Book 9. In proposing such a relationship I am following the arguments of Thomas Oberlies and Andreas Bigger, who have suggested that the authors of the 3.80-139 section may have drawn material directly from the account of Baladeva's journey.[173] In support of this hypothesis, Oberlies points out that a large block of material is almost identical in both accounts (3.81.98-115 and 9.37.34-49).[174] It is possible of course that the Book 9 section drew from Book 3, or both from a common source, but I would point out that Baladeva's tour is quite formulaic in its construction, and consistent in its style and presentation of *tīrtha* stories, while the materials of Book 3 are distinctly heterogeneous and as a whole appear far more reworked. As such I feel it is more likely that the Book 3 account takes this material from Book 9. In any case, it is clear that the treatment of the Sarasvatī river in the Book 3 passage has a great deal in common with the Baladeva account, and shares much of its *yātsattra* imagery and mythology, particularly the theme of drowning and heavenly ascension.

Thus far I have emphasized the material shared between Books 3 and 9 concerning the Sarasvatī river. But the 3.80-139 section as a whole expands the itinerary of the *tīrthayātrā* far beyond the Sarasvatī river, and presents a map of the sacred fords that accomodates all of Āryāvarta; these fords are to be visited in an East-South-West-North sequence. As such the expanded *tīrthayātrā* is a circumambulation of the earth (*pradakṣiṇaṁ pṛthivīṁ* +√*kṛ*), which, it would seem, seeks the same totality and sense of universal completeness as expressed in the *digvijaya* or military conquest of the four directions, which is also carried out by following the clockwise pattern.

The circumambulatory movement in the Book 3 account governs the two lists of fording places and the Pāṇḍavas' actual tour. As for the lists of *tīrthas*, the first (3.80.40-3.83.83) does not follow as clearly discernable a route as the second, but it is generally understood to present its long enumeration of fording places in a clockwise order.[175] Dhaumya's list of *tīrthas* (3.85-88), however, is

[173] Oberlies, "Die Ratschläge des Sehers Nārada," 135-137; Bigger, "Wege und Umwege zum Himmel," 161-164; Bigger, *Balarāma im* Mahābhārata, 102.

[174] Oberlies, "Die Ratschläge des Sehers Nārada," 136.

[175] Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, 31; Oberlies, "Die Ratschläge des Sehers Nārada," 132; Bigger, "Wege und Umwege," 161.

very clearly presented in the sun-wise pattern, as is the tour of the Pāṇḍavas (3.93-139). It is clear from the two lists and actual *tīrthayātrā* of the Pāṇḍavas that the ideal construction of the undertaking according to an East-South-West-North movement is far more important than providing an actual pilgrimage route; attempts to draw from them a practicable circuit are doomed to frustration.[176] The clockwise movement also recurs later in the journey when the Pāṇḍavas are given a sun-wise survey of the Lokapālas or great world-protectors and mountain ranges by Dhaumya; this is followed by an explanation of the sun's movement through the four cardinal points (3.160). The *Mahābhārata*'s other pilgrimage account (1.206-210), discussed below, follows the sun-wise route beginning in the East as well.

While the itinerary is thus expanded to encompass the whole known world, the tour described in the lists and carried out by the Pāṇḍavas nonetheless retains the important motif of suicide by drowning in the expanded map of pilgrimage as well, particularly at the site of Prayāga: "Your resolution to die at Prayāga, my son, should be inhibited by neither the pronouncements of the Veda nor of people [i.e. by Vedic or worldly prohibitions against suicide]." *na vedavacanāt tāta na lokavacanād api | matir utkramaṇīyā te prayāgamaraṇaṁ prati || 3.83.78.* Here I would suggest that the concept of suicide by drowning at a holy place leading immediately to heaven has been carried over from the Sarasvatī to more distant places in the ever-broadening map of *tīrthas*, just as in the account of Baladeva's *sārasvata tīrthayātrā* we saw such sites multiplying downstream from Plakṣa Prasravaṇa or Kārapacana.

A significant aspect of the development proposed here (that is, from the Vedic rite of the *sārasvata yātsattra* to Baladeva's Sarasvatī *tīrthayātrā*, and thence to the para-Āryāvarta *tīrthayātrā*) that we should take note of is the text's rhetoric regarding the merit and status of the pilgrimage tour itself. That the pilgrimage tour is a new religious undertaking superior to, but measured explicitly against, the older Vedic rites is especially clear in the first list narrated by Nārada/Pulastya. At the beginning of his list, Pulastya emphasizes that

> The Vedic sacrifices [*yajña*] are not available to a poor man, O king; the sacrifices have much paraphernalia and a large quantity of various materials. These are available to kings or wealthy men anywhere, not to lonely souls of dissolute family bereft of materials and wealth. But now learn [from me], O best of warriors, that rite which is equal in merits to those of the Vedic sacrifices, which is available to even poor men, O King: Best of the Bharatas, this is the highest mystery of the *ṛṣis* — visiting the holy fording places is better even than Vedic sacrifices [*yajñair api viśiṣyate*]. If he has not fasted for three nights, nor visited the fords, nor given away gold and cows, that man is poor indeed. If one sacrifices with such expensive [Vedic] rites as the Agniṣṭoma and

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[176] Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*, 31.

so on, the fruit that is obtained does not equal that accruing from the
visitation of the fords (3.80.35-40).

In the list of *tīrtha*s that follows, the merit accruing from bathing at particular
places is always measured against the merit of grand Vedic rites such as the
Gavām Ayana (3.80.123; 3.82.56; 3.83.30, etc.), the Rājasūya (3.80.107;
3.80.117; 3.81.6; 3.82.69, etc.), Aśvamedha (3.80.87; 3.81.6; 81.45; 3.82.38, etc.),
Agniṣṭoma (3.80.63; 3.81.42; 3.82.128; 3.83.52, etc.) and others, most often
asserting hyperbolically that bathing at such-and-such ford brings the merit of a
hundred or a thousand Horse Sacrifices. These grand rituals of the Vedic age were
the gold-standard, as it were, in the economy of *puṇya* or merit, but they have
now been surpassed exponentially by the *tīrthayātrā*.

This type of merit-rhetoric indicates the supercession of the Vedic
paradigm by the newer religious activity of *tīrtha*-visiting and illustrates in yet
another way the direction in which the proposed development occurred: the Vedic
sārasvata yātsattra had provided the model for constructing or conceiving
Baladeva's Sarasvatī pilgrimage, while the Book 3 account, appearing to draw
upon Baladeva's tour in constructing the *tīrthayātrā* as a circumambulation of
Āryāvarta, asserts the superiority of this new institution over the old Vedic rites.
The pattern of expansion here is thus both geographic and social, for a pilgrimage
involves no ritual implements or costly fees to officiating brahmins, but may be
undertaken even by "lonely souls of dissolute family bereft of materials and
wealth." Hence I would argue that, while Book 3's presentation of the
circumambulatory *tīrthayātrā* seems to inherit from Book 9 much of the
sārasvata yātsattra's ritual and mythological elements, it nonetheless reflects a
later conception of the *tīrthayātrā* and self-consciously establishes itself as a
newer, better practice than the Vedic rites.

The Pāṇḍavas' *tīrthayātrā* in Book 3 is thus marked by circumambulatory
movement, but retains the important motifs of drowning and ascension to heaven
from the *yātsattra* and Book 9 material. But the Pāṇḍavas do not die here in Book
3 at the end of their clockwise tour. If *svargārohaṇa* or ascension to heaven is tied
to the rite of circumambulatory pilgrimage, why do they not ascend to heaven at
the end of their tour?

Here I will point out that once the Pāṇḍavas reach the last leg of their trip,
they do in fact depart from the world of mortals and enter the mythical and
heavenly realm of the northern mountains. The whole region of the
Gandhamādana to which they ascend after their pilgrimage tour is inhabited by
mythical beings: *rākṣasa*s, *kiṁnara*s, *siddha*s, *apsaras*es, and particularly *yakṣa*s
and *gandharva*s who are governed over by the god of wealth Kubera. The region
is "invisible to mortal eyes" (3.140.3), "difficult to approach," and thus requires
tapas or ascetic rigor in order to be accessed (3.140.8; 3.141.22; 3.142.25;
3.143.4). And even though they exert themselves with concentration and *tapas*,
the Pāṇḍavas only reach their heavenly destination with the help of Ghaṭotkaca,

the monstrous *rākṣasa* son of Bhīma, who picks them up and flies them to Badarī, the *āśrama* of Nara and Nārāyaṇa (3.145.7). The goal of this entire mountain trek is to reunite with Arjuna, who has actually been dwelling in heaven with Indra the whole time of their *tīrthayātrā*. Hence Oberlies remarks that "[i]n the high mountains of the North, [the Pāṇḍavas] not only approach heaven, where their brother Arjuna is dwelling, but they attain it: the Gandhamādana is a portion of heaven set upon the earth, the holy Mount Kailāsa."[177] The peak of this mysterious northern mountain range is the most logical place for Arjuna to reunite with his family; he has left the earth altogether, and returns to his family from the sky in a heavenly chariot just in the same manner that Yudhiṣṭhira will depart from the earth to heaven in Book 17. As such, the Pāṇḍavas' sun-wise tour recounted in Book 3 does indeed conclude, as the *sārasvata yātsattra*, with an ascension to heaven or *svargārohaṇa*. Although they do not die here, I would suggest we understand the Pāṇḍavas' ascent up the Gandhamādana to meet Arjuna as quite literally an ascent towards heaven. This is of considerable importance for our treatment of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths in Book 17, for there they perform the same circumambulation of the earth and literally ascend to heaven.

3.1.3. Arjuna's (solo) *tīrthayātrā* (1.206-210)

Arjuna's pilgrimage is the shortest and, for our purposes, least significant of the *Mahābhārata*'s three *tīrthayātrā* accounts, but nonetheless bears mentioning as it provides another example of a sun-wise tour of the sacred fords. This representation of *tīrthayātrā* is far less concerned with enumerating the fords or defining the merits of bathing at such-and-such place; rather it provides a backdrop or frame for a year of adventures that Arjuna undertakes on his own. Following his violation of a family agreement, Arjuna spends a year visiting many fords (*tīrthas*),[178] although in his account the term *tīrthayātrā* is not used. Rather, it is said that he "seeks out the *tīrthas*" (*tīrthāny anucarantam*, 1.210.3), and his wanderings follow the East-South-West-North pattern discussed above. The *tīrthas* and hermitages (*āśramas*) he visits are found in the first list of *tīrthas* presented in the Book 3 account (3.80.41-3.83.83), Dhaumya's list (3.85-88), and follow the same sequence as the Pāṇḍavas' actual tour (89-139).[179]

　　Although visiting these places appears to be the motivation for Arjuna's wanderings, the tour functions as a backdrop for a series of amorous adventures, which constitute the real focus of his year spent away from Draupadī and brothers. Arjuna meets three women, with whom he shares varying levels of

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[177] Oberlies, "Die Ratschläge des Sehers Nārada," 133.

[178] The CE's phrasing is "*dvādaśa varṣāṇi*" lit. twelve years and not months, but the Critical Edition's reading is dubious: see van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, 466, note on 1.204.25.

[179] Oberlies, "Arjunas Himmelreise und die Tīrthayātrā der Pāṇḍavas," 112-113.

romantic commitment: Ulūpī, a snake woman, who begs him for sex and seduces him with her strong debating skills; Citrāṅgadā, the daugther of the King Citravāhana of Maṇalūra,[180] upon whom he fathers a son (Babhruvāhana), and Subhadrā, the sister of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, whom he abducts and marries, with Kṛṣṇa's assistance, at the end of his year. In addition to these three women, Arjuna also encounters a set of five *apsaras*es or celestial nymphs whom he rescues from their cursed states as crocodiles. Arjuna's tour terminates in the West, where he meets up with Kṛṣṇa at Prabhāsa, abducts and marries Subhadrā, and then turns North in order to return to his brothers at Indraprastha.

This account of pilgrimage is of course very different from the material we find in Book 3, and is hardly concerned with the religious value of visiting *tīrthas*. Although specific *tīrthas* are mentioned, indeed the same ones lauded at great length by Lomaśa when they are visited by the Pāṇḍavas' in Book 3, their enumeration in Arjuna's tour is cursory, and there is hardly a sign of the vigorous propaganda and enthusiasm for the religious undertaking that characterizes the 3.80-139 section. The pilgrimage tour in 1.206-210 seems to function first and foremost as a means for structuring the story of Arjuna's deeds; the real emphasis is placed on his virility and escapades with the three women and five *apsaras*es.

It is important to note, however, that Arjuna follows the tour around Āryāvarta in a sun-wise pattern as in the Book 3 material, even if the tour is just a means to other narrative ends. This would in fact seem to point to an understanding of the rite of pilgrimage as an established practice, and as such Bigger has suggested that Arjuna's tour might be the most recent of the *Mahābhārata*'s three *tīrthayātrā* accounts.[181] In any case, it does seem that the story of Arjuna's *tīrtha* tour takes the institution for granted and uses it as a narrative device, while the Pāṇḍavas' is first and foremost about pilgrimage itself. Hence the account of the Pāṇḍavas' tour, which expounds the merits of visiting the sacred fords at such length, might well represent an older attitude towards this institution than we find in Arjuna's case, for the latter clearly feels no need to sensationalize the practice as in Book 3. This brings us back once again to the hypothesis that Baladeva's trip represents an older conception of *tīrthayātrā* in the epic text, while the sun-wise movement represents a later understanding or construction of the rite.

3.2. The Three *tīrthayātrās* and Books 17 & 18

The key concern of this chapter is to define the relationship of the Pāṇḍavas' final sun-wise tour of the earth and ascension to heaven to the institution of *tīrthayātrā* as represented in the *Mahābhārata*. We have established the background of the

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[180] The city is called Maṇalūra only in the context of Arjuna's pilgrimage in Book 1. Later it is known as Maṇipūra (14.77-82; 17.1.26).

[181] Bigger, *Balarāma im* Mahābhārata, 103.

epic's concept of circumambulatory pilgrimage above, and I will argue in this section that this rite — particular as represented in the Book 3 account — stands as the model for the circling of the earth at 17.1.41cd-17.2.2. But as I have stated above, the terms *tīrtha* and *tīrthayātrā* are not used in Book 17, and clockwise circumambulation in the *Mahābhārata* occurs far more often as a gesture of reverence than as a route for pilgrimage. Hence one might ask: Could the tour around Āryāvarta in Book 17 simply constitute a veneration of the earth, or merely recall the sun's route itself, or even the *digvijaya*? Clearly we should address this matter before moving on to our concluding arguments about the nature of the Pāṇḍavas' last tour of the earth and subsequent ascension to heaven. Two points will be offered here by way of reply, followed by a few additional details which seem to link the Pāṇḍavas' Book 3 tour with their journey in Book 17.

First I would point to some details from the apparatus of the Critical Edition which support the hypothesis that the Pāṇḍavas' circumambulation of the earth in Book 17 does indeed represent a *tīrthayātrā*. We find in several manuscripts (K2, K4, D3, D4, T3), immediately following the *pradakṣiṇa* of the earth the statement that "those irreproachable ones, mentally worshipping Janārdana, [saw] the great earth which is made into a pilgrimage site by the scattering of the footprints of the Lord."[182] Here the circumambulation is associated with *tīrthayātrā*. Another such case occurs in two Kashmiri manuscripts (K2, K3). Immediately after the short description of their circumambulation cited above, we have the lines:

> Then they bathed in the Brāhmaṇī, and seeing the God standing in the water, they went to that Śiva of whom a portion is in the middle[183] and saw that mighty Rudra; they bathed at the five-fold Prayāga [sites] and went to the beautiful mount Himagiri; they also honored the Lord [Śiva] and bathed in the beautiful Haṃśodaka; they saw the god of gods at Kedāra, and [there they] carefully sprinkled themselves with water; they gave *piṇḍa* (rice-ball) offerings according to the precepts and satisfied the manes and gods [thereby]; then, drinking water according to the ritual injunctions, [they/he] went to the Nandā river and, returning to the great path, went to the Himavat.[184]

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[182] *haripādāṅkaviṇyāsatīrthīkṛtamahābhuvam | manobhiḥ pūjayantaś ca janārdanam aninditāḥ |*

[183] *madhyamāṃśaṃ śivaṃ*: [with *jale sthitam*: "standing in the water up to his waist," or alternately reading the word as a place-name: "they went to the auspicious Madhyamāṃśa."

[184] *tatas te brāhmaṇīṃ snātvā dṛṣṭvā devaṃ jale sthitam |*
madhyamāṃśaṃ śivaṃ gatvā dṛṣṭvā rudraṃ mahābalam |
prayāgapañcake snātvā gatvā himagiriṃ śubham |
īśānaṃ tu namaskṛtya snātvā haṃsodake śubhe |
devadevaṃ tu kedāraṃ dṛṣṭvā spṛṣṭvā prayatnataḥ |
piṇḍaṃ dattvā vidhānena pitṝn devāṃś ca tarpya vai |
udakaṃ vidhivat pītvā tato nandāṃ jagāma vai |
mahāpanthānam āvṛtya himavantaṃ jagāma ha |

Most sites mentioned here are well-known pilgrimage locations today, particularly the Pañch Prayāg, which are a set of five popular sites in the Garhwal Himālayas.[185] Kedāra is known as a *tīrtha* elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* (3.81.59), and the Nandā river is the heart of the long-standing Nandā Devī Rāj Jāt *yātra* still undertaken today every twelve years. Although these passages are excluded from the Critical Edition's principal text for 17.2, they indicate to us that the Pāṇḍavas' last tour of the world was understood, in at least some branches of the *Mahābhārata*'s manuscript tradition, as a *tīrthayātrā* or pilgrimage tour.

Another factor suggesting that the Pāṇḍavas' tour in Book 17 is not simply a veneration of the earth, but rather represents the same activity of pilgrimage they had undertaken in Book 3, is the language used in Book 17 to characterize the circumabulatory movement. The Pāṇḍavas' final walk is described with the phrase "[they] desire[d] to carry out a circumambulation of the earth (*prādakṣiṇyaṁ cikīrṣantaḥ pṛthivyā[ḥ]*, 17.1.44)." This matches the construction *pṛthivyāḥ pradakṣiṇam* + √*kṛ* used in Book 3 to describe the sun-wise visitation of the *tīrtha*s. At the start of the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage account in Book 3, Yudhiṣṭhira greets Nārada with the question "what is the fruit for one who, fully intent upon the sacred fording places, does a circumambulation of the earth (*pradakṣiṇaṁ yaḥ kurute pṛthivīṁ tīrthatatparaḥ | kiṁ phalaṁ tasya* ... 3.80.10)?" The use of the phrase *prādakṣiṇyaṁ cikīrṣantaḥ pṛthivyā[ḥ]* thus gives us a clue that the author of Book 17 understood the Pāṇḍavas' circumambulation of the earth to reproduce their former *tīrthayātrā*s.

A few additional details concerning the manner in which the Pāṇḍavas ascend into the mountains in Book 17 will also suggest a link with Book 3 and support the hypothesis that the former repeats or re-enacts the *tīrthayātrā* of the latter. In Book 17, the Pāṇḍavas undertake their final march on empty stomachs (*kṛtopavāsa*, 17.1.27) and must concentrate as they walk. They are "joined to *yoga*" (*yogayukta*, 17.1.28; 17.2.1); "possess the *dharma* of *yoga*" (*yogadharmin-* 17.1.44; 17.2.3); their selves are restrained (*niyatātman*, 17.2.1), until their focus begins to fail and Draupadī, "falling away from *yoga*" (*bhraṣṭayoga*, 17.2.3), collapses and dies. Precisely what this *yoga* consists of is not clear, but evidently their final walk is as trying mentally as it is physically. They are able to maintain this concentration until they reach the northern mountains, at which point they begin to collapse.

This theme is clear in the 3.80-172 section as well. As in Book 17, the Pāṇḍavas "eat little" (*laghvāhāra*, 3.141.6; *mitāhāra*, 3.142.28) during their ascent to the heavenly realms in Book 3. They are warned beforehand by their guide Lomaśa that they will have to maintain utmost concentration (*samādhiṁ*

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[185] Here the Alaknandā river (source of the Gaṅgā) meets five tributaries, after which the river becomes the Gaṅgā proper: Viṣṇuprayāg (confluence with the Dhauli Gaṅgā), Nandprayāg (confluence with the Mandākinī), Karṇaprayāg (confluence with the Piṇḍarī), Rudraprayāg (confluence with the Mandākinī), and Devprayāg (confluence with the Bhāgirathī).

paramaṁ kuru, 3.140.8) and be courageous (*vikramaṇe bhava*, 3.140.9) when crossing Mount Gandhamādana; *tapas* or ascetic rigor is the key to accessing this dangerous realm (3.141.1; 3.141.22; 3.142.25; 3.143.4). Lomaśa's admonitions are so grave that Yudhiṣṭhira gets spooked, and he calls on everyone to "observe the utmost purity (*param śaucam ihācaradhvam*, 3.140.15)." Although the journey is surely physically taxing, everyone's concern is first and foremost with mental states (3.156.20-24).

In Book 3, the Pāṇḍavas do their best to restrain themselves when ascending Gandhamādana (*niyatātman*, 3.142.28), but with the same result: Draupadī collapses: "Then, among those great-souled Pāṇḍavas who had only just set out, Draupadī, unaccustomed to walking on foot, collapsed (*tataḥ prayātamātreṣu pāṇḍaveṣu mahātmasu | padbhyām anucitā gantuṁ draupadī samupāviśat ǁ 3.144.1).*" In fact the collapse of Draupadī in Book 17 is expressed in similar language: "But among all of those quickly-advancing ones possessed of the *dharma* of *yoga*, Yājñasenī [Draupadī], falling away from *yoga*, fell to the earth (*teṣāṁ tu gacchatāṁ śīghraṁ sarveṣāṁ yogadharmiṇām | yājñasenī bhraṣṭayogā nipapāta mahītale ǁ 17.2.3.*" The necessity for fasting, mental discipline and Draupadī's failure to maintain concentration are all conspicuously similar here.

And so we return again to this key point: while neither Draupadī nor anyone else dies in Book 3, their circumambulatory pilgrimage tour is in fact completed by an ascent towards heaven where they will meet with Arjuna who has actually been in heaven during their tour. On this point it is interesting to note that in both Books 3 and 17, the attempt to reach the heavenly realms of the northern mountains on foot ultimately fails. In Book 3, the Pāṇḍavas decide, once Draupadī has collapsed, to call on Ghaṭotkaca, Bhīma's monstrously powerful half-*rākṣasa* son; the monster then flies them the rest of the way (3.145.7). Hence even with their concentration and *tapas*, they are only able to reach their destination with supernatural help. Meanwhile at the end of the *Mahābhārata*, all but Yudhiṣṭhira die before reaching there — or rather reach there in the manner of the *sārasvata yātsattrin*s by dying *en route*. Yudhiṣṭhira is later met by Indra and whisked up to heaven in a celestial chariot. In both 3 and 17, then, the final step of this northward journey to heaven cannot be taken by mere mortals — it is heaven, after all — despite the Pāṇḍavas' fasting and concentration.

We may turn now to a final element of Book 18 that is of interest to us, and find therein perhaps the most important detail connecting the narrative of the epic's conclusion with the *Mahābhārata*'s other *tīrthayātrā* material: Yudhiṣṭhira's death by drowning in the Gaṅgā river (18.3.39-40). As we have remarked above, Yudhiṣṭhira trades in his human form for an immortal one, following Indra's invitation to bathe in the Gaṅgā. Yudhiṣṭhira dives into the river, and once fully submerged underwater (*samāpluta*), dispenses with his mortal body and assumes a new divine form with which he can dwell in heaven.

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We have seen above that this is the manner in which the *sārasvata yātsattrin* brings the *sattra* of the Sarasvatī river to a close. Entering the waters at Kārapacana, the site of the fatal *avabhṛtha* or concluding bath, the consecrated *sattrin* disappears and ascends to heaven. Baladeva's pilgrimage recalls this attainment of heaven by drowning in the Sarasvatī at various *tīrthas* along the same river, while the Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage account in Book 3 preserves the motif as well: the head-waters of the Sarasvatī river is the place where the *sārasvata yātsattra* terminates with a heaven-winning suicide by drowning; indeed, men go there by the thousands for this purpose (3.129.21; 3.130.1-2). The *Mahābhārata* inherits from the Vedic sacrificial culture this form of religious suicide, appropriating it first in its construction of Baladeva's pilgrimage, and retaining it through the subsequent development of the concept of *tīrthayātrā* into the sun-wise tour of the known world, particularly at Prayāga.

We may now answer a question posed above in section 2.4: If the *sārasvata yātsattra* is colouring the account of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths, why does Yudhiṣthira dive into the Gaṅgā river and not the Sarasvatī? Here we must recall that in Baladeva's pilgrimage, the sites at which meritorious drownings take place seem to multiply downstream from the head-waters of the Sarasvatī; at the mid-course *tīrthas* of Pṛthūdaka, Vasiṣṭhāpavāham, Badarapācana and others, Baladeva is told stories which tout the merits of drowning at those locations. And just as such places multiplied along the Sarasvatī from the initial site of Kārapacana in Baladeva's case, so we found that once the *tīrthayātrā* came to be conceived as a clock-wise tour of the known world, sites where one could attain heaven by drowning were found within the broader itinerary as well. Here the Sarasvatī retains her old status, but the site of Prayāga at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā (and today, the invisible, underground Sarasvatī as well) has become equally if not more important. The geographical expansion of the *tīrthayātrā*'s domain naturally entails the inclusion of sites where suicide by drowning leads one directly to heaven; the Gaṅgā river is especially important in this respect. Hence, although the *Mahābhārata* retains the memory of the Sarasvatī river as the site of the *sārasvata yātsattra* and its fatal terminal bath, it is not the Sarasvatī but the Gaṅgā river where Yudhiṣthira shuffles off his mortal coil.

The death of Yudhiṣthira thus associates the sun-wise tour of the earth with a *svargārohaṇa* or ascension to heaven, achieved through drowning in a holy river. The river is not the Sarasvatī, for the Dharma King's final journey did not follow Baladeva's route, but rather the same circuit he himself had traversed in Book 3. There, the para-Āryāvarta tour concluded, as here, with an ascent to the northern mountains to reach heaven. Neither Yudhiṣthira nor his family died then — their goal was to meet Arjuna and return to the realm of mortals. But returning once again with his family (who fail, as before, to reach there on foot), he casts off his mortal body in the Gaṅgā.

3.3. Conclusion

In this chapter I have striven to demonstrate that the reason the authors of Book 17 had the Pāṇḍavas undertake a *tīrthayātrā* just prior to their ascent into the northern mountains is because this ritual was tied in the epic text to the Vedic rite of the *sārasvata yātsattra*, a rite already present in the mind of these authors, as I have argued in chapter 2. A *sārasvata yātsattrin* ascends the Sarasvatī river in order to attain heaven; he may die along the way, or may drown himself in the river's head-waters — both will bring him instantly to heaven. The association between this rite and the *tīrthayātrā* can be traced from Baladeva's pilgrimage undertaken during the great Bhārata war. His ascent up the Sarasvatī river to visit the sacred fording places represents an older conception or construction of *tīrthayātrā* in the epic which takes the *sārasvata yātsattra* as its model, and preserves from it the motif of heaven-winning suicide or self-imposed death by drowning in the Sarasvatī.

The Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage tour in Book 3 seems to build in part upon the account in Book 9, carrying over from it the theme of heaven-winning suicide by drowning, but now within an itinerary that covers all of Āryāvarta. As such the holy sites from which one may reach heaven by drowning include Pṛthūdaka, Prayāga, and others, in addition to the old standard of Plakṣa Prasravaṇa and Kārapacana at the head-waters of the Sarasvatī river. The lists and actual pilgrimage of the Pāṇḍavas in Book 3 follow the route of the sun, beginning in the East and terminating in the North. The actual *tīrthayātrā* undertaken by the Pāṇḍavas here also preserves the concept of heavenly ascension at the termination of the rite: the *svargārohaṇa* which concludes this *tīrthayātrā* is not a literal one brought about by death, but is present insofar as the Pāṇḍavas ascend the heavenly Mount Gandhamādana in order to meet Arjuna, who has been dwelling in heaven with Indra. Their sun-wise tour of the fords is thus a ritual undertaking concluding with the attainment of heaven — as in the *sārasvata yātsattra* — but now following the expanded sun-wise para-Āryāvarta tour.

At the end of the *Mahābhārata*, the Pāṇḍavas re-enact this journey, performing a *tīrthayātrā* according to the sun-wise circuit, and ascend to heaven through the northern mountains as they had in Book 3. All but Yudhiṣṭhira reach heaven by dying *en route* in the manner of *sārasvata yātsattrins*, while the Dharma King drowns himself in the Gaṅgā river and ascends to heaven. Thus the rites of the sun-wise *tīrthayātrā* and *sārasvata yātsattra* appear tied here, as they are in the Book 3 section, and constitute the religious institutions upon which the narrative of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths is constructed.

Understanding the family relationship between the *sārasvata yātsattra* and the *prādakṣiṇyā tīrthayātrā* thus gives us a hypothesis as to why the Pāṇḍavas' deaths are preceded by a circumambulatory movement around the earth, and why it may be that Yudhiṣṭhira drowns in the Gaṅgā and not the Sarasvatī river. In proposing this reading I have tried to extend the arguments of chapter 2 concerning the structuring effect of ritual institutions upon the narrative content

and configuration of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion. As before, I have identified Vedic ritual as the key reference point against which we must understand the heroes' deaths: not only did the *yātsattra* help to shape the narrative of Books 17 and 18 directly, it also helped to shape the *Mahābhārata*'s construction of the rite of pilgrimage, which itself forms an important aspect of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths as well.

This brings us back to the issue at the heart of this dissertation: we cannot understand the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion without understanding the ways in which the poem has been shaped by Vedic ritual and mythological themes. As has been repeatedly observed in scholarship treating this issue,[186] such themes seldom appear on the surface, and may be easily overlooked if we restrict our conception of the text to its character as a war epic, *smṛti*, or seminal text of *bhakti* Hinduism. Approaching the poem with a sensitivity to the ritual and mythic world of the Veda has therefore become a key strategy for developing our understanding of the *Mahābhārata*'s content and structure. Particularly in this chapter we have seen the value of such an approach on a larger scale within the poem, and proposed that Vedic ritual themes affected not only the poem's narrative, but its representation or construction of non-Vedic rituals as well. Clearly, then, we must continue to develop an appreciation for the particular ways in which the *Mahābhārata* has been shaped by Vedic themes.

In the the next chapter, we will continue to bring this type of reading to the *Mahābhārata*'s final scenes, but there we will follow the Pāṇḍavas through to their post-death fates, and investigate closely what happens to them in the afterlife. Once again, I will argue that we can only truly understand what is happening at the poem's conclusion by reading Book 18 against the paradigm of Vedic myth against which the characters and events of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole are cast.

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[186] See section 2.1.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0. Introduction

We may recall from our synopsis of *parvan* 18 in section 1.1.2. that once Yudhiṣṭhira has reached heaven by means of the heavenly Gaṅgā, he sees various people there: Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, Karṇa, Bhīma, Nakula and Sahadeva, Draupadī, as well as the five Draupadeyas or sons of Draupadī, and several other warriors and characters of the poem. Once this list of people is concluded, we revert back to the narrative frame of the poem at the beginning of *adhyāya* 5, and a short exchange between Janamejaya and Vaiśaṃpāyana takes place: Janamejaya is curious — all of these people were enjoying heaven on the basis of their *puṇya* or merit; but what became of them after this *puṇya* wore off? How long did they stay in heaven? Was it really forever? At the heart of this question is the fact that the *Mahābhārata*'s characters are understood to be human agents subject to the laws of *karma* and rebirth, as well as partial embodiments (*aṃśa*, lit. "portion" or "share") of divinities (*aṃśin*, lit. "one possessing a share," i.e. the whole to which the part belongs). Janamejaya's question thus ultimately bears upon and directs our attention to the final identities of the story's principal characters.

In the Critical Edition text, however, Vaiśaṃpāyana's reply to this *à propos* question is dense and not entirely clear. Consequently, I will attempt to construct, in section 4.2, a transparent reading of Vaiśaṃpāyana's answer by consulting other published editions of the passage, beginning with the Vulgate edition and the accompanying commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha. As we will see, two conflicting readings seem to present themselves in these materials: (1) not all of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters were able to return and be reabsorbed back into the divine beings from whom they had been born as *aṃśas* or "portion-descendants" at the beginning of the poem, and (2) they were all able to do so. After listening carefully to Nīlakaṇṭha's arguments in favor of the former of these two options in section 4.2.1, we will examine other readings of the passage and argue in favour of the latter in section 4.2.2: all of the heroes of the *Mahābhārata* were reabsorbed back into the divine beings from whom they had descended at the start of the epic.

By identifying in this way precisely where and why I disagree with Nīlakaṇṭha, I will bring into sharper focus the issue of the epic characters' final identities as we find them at the conclusion of the poem. But in so doing we open up the broader issue of the mythic framework upon which these divine identities or equivalences are premised, and which underlies the poem's narrative. Section 4.3. takes on this larger problem and reframes the issue raised by Janamejaya and pursued by Nīlakaṇṭha, but now from a History of Religions perspective: Why do the characters of the *Mahābhārata* have such complex identities? What does the fact that the poem ends the way it does — that is to say, by having every character return to his or her respective *aṃśin* — tell us about the mythic framework underlying the epic's plot and cast? Here again we will see, as in chapters 2 and 3,

that the Vedic universe provides a key frame of reference against which *parvans* 17 and 18 must be read. Understanding what happens to the characters after they die requires that we understand the *Mahābhārata* as a text fashioned in great part against the paradigm of Vedic myth and ritual. Through both our conversation with Nīlakaṇtha, and in the broader treatment of the mythic framework that follows, I hope to illustrate once again that an appreciation for Vedic themes and motifs is necessary if we wish to understand why these key moments of the poem's narrative are constructed as they are.

4.1. *aṃśa, aṃśin* and the Mythic Identities of the *Mahābhārata* Cast

Before diving into these issues we must clarify some important terms and their underlying themes. The two key terms here are *aṃśa* — literally a portion or share, and *aṃśin* or that which possesses the portion, i.e. the greater whole of which the *aṃśa* is a minor piece. Each major character in the *Mahābhārata* is said to be, or to have been born from, a portion (*aṃśa*) of a *deva* (mostly gods of the Vedic pantheon) or other celestial-supernatural creatures such as *gandharvas* (a stock-class of male heavenly creatures, inferior to the *devas*), *apsarases* (the corresponding female stock-class of heavenly nymphs), *asuras* (demons, the arch-enemies of the *devas*) and so on; these supernatural creatures are thus the *aṃśins* of the poem's cast of heroes.

These mythic or supernatural identities of the epic's principal characters are defined in the *Ādiparvan* at 1.58-61. Here Janamejaya prods Vaiśaṃpāyana for details about the characters of the story he is about to hear: "Now please tell me, O illustrious one, precisely for what purpose these great warriors resembling the gods were born on earth" (1.58.2). The answer is a secret of the gods (*rahasyaṃ...devānāṃ*). Long ago during the *kṛtayuga* or golden age, humanity observed *dharma* perfectly and thus flourished and lived for hundreds of thousands of years. The earth therefore became overpopulated and among the teeming mass of humans the *asuras* or demons were born, who had been defeated in battle by the gods and cast down from heaven. The earth, doubly suppressed by overpopulation and ill-behaved demons, sought help from Brahmā. Brahmā promptly instructed the *devas, gandharvas* and *apsarases* to 'be born on the earth with portions of yourselves in order to expel the burden from the earth' (1.58.46-47).[187] The term *bhāga* is used once here for "portion" or "piece," but thereafter the term most often used to refer to these detachable pieces of divinity is *aṃśa*. The gods all come down from heaven "for the sake of destroying the enemies of

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[187] As de Jong has pointed out [J.W. de Jong, "The Over-Burdened Earth in India and Greece." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no.3 (1985): 398], the theme of the over-populated earth requesting assistance from the gods recurs elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* without making any reference to the incarnation or descent of gods and demons: Book 3, appendix passage 16 ins. after 3.142; Book 7, appendix passage 8 ins. after 7.49; 12.248-250.

the immortals and the welfare of all the worlds" (*amarārivināśāya sarvalokahitāya ca*, 1.59.3ab). The basic mythological theme at work here, namely a great battle between *devas* and *asuras*, is characteristically Vedic and is typical especially of the literature of the *Brāhmaṇas*.[188]

This mass descent is referred to as the *aṁśāvataraṇa* or "descending of the portions [of the gods]." After a brief mythological primer on where these gods themselves came from originally (1.59.7-1.60), we get a full list of the incarnation-identities, specifying every major character of the *Mahābhārata* as the *aṁśa* of a *deva, asura, apsaras, gandharva* and so on. This section (1.61) is called the *Book of Partial Incarnations* and reads quite like a playbill: In the role of Yudhiṣṭhira ... Dharma; as Karṇa ... Sūrya, etc. And so now that Janamejaya knows who is "playing" whom and why the various gods descended to earth in *aṁśas* or portions (i.e. to defeat the demons, relieve the earth of her burden and restore order to all the worlds), he is ready to hear the whole story from the beginning.

Subsequently in the *Mahābhārata*, the individual "incarnatee" (*aṁśa*) / "incarnator" (*aṁśin*) identities are reasserted, particularly for the Pāṇḍavas, who are all fathered by Vedic deities: Yudhiṣṭhira by Dharma, Bhīma by Vāyu, Arjuna by Indra, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva by the twin-gods the Aśvins. Whether through the use of multiple epithets reflecting their divine origins (e.g. the frequent Dharmaputra for Yudhiṣṭhira), simple identification (e.g. *eṣa* [Arjuna] *putro mahendrasya*, 1.125.11c), or in the occasional episode featuring the special divine father - mortal son relationship,[189] the divine ancestry of the Pāṇḍavas is often emphasized. This also applies to less savory characters such as Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, Śakuni, and Aśvatthāman who are identified as demonic (*asura*) incarnations.[190] The Vedic mythology behind this framework of the heroes' special ancestry is also recalled occasionally in the course of the epic: Janamejaya refers back to the *Book of Partial Incarnations* just before the story of the actual births of the Pāṇḍavas is related, recalling Vaiśaṁpāyana's earlier declaration that the five brothers were portions of the gods (1.109.1-4). Meanwhile the theme of the *aṁśāvataraṇa* or "portion-descent" which underlies the epic characters' identities is referred to by Nārada at 2.33.11-20 and Vyāsa at 11.8.20-26 and 15.39.5-16; the two sages recall on these occasions that the entire Bhārata conflict is in fact the playing-out on earth of an age-old battle between the *devas* and the *asuras*. Finally, the incarnation-identities are reasserted at the very end of the epic once the characters have all died and ascended to heaven. As such

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[188] See, for example, *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa* 5.5.15; *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 1.23; 2.11; 2.31; 2.36; 3.39; 3.42; 3.50; 4.5; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.2.4.8; 1.2.5.1; 1.4.1.34; 1.5.3.2; 1.5.4.6; 1.7.2.22; 2.1.1.8; 2.1.2.13; 2.2.2.8; 5.1.1.1; 13.8.2.1.

[189] 3.296-298 plays upon the parentage of Yudhiṣṭhira by Dharma, while 3.43 and 3.161-171 premises an adventure of Arjuna's upon his being Indra's son. Bhīma's encounter with Hanūmān at 3.146.59-150.15 similarly presupposes that both he and the monkey-character of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are both sons of the Vedic god of wind Vāyu.

[190] Duryodhana gets his own divine-ancestry-revealing adventure at 3.239.18-240.28.

the closure of this background Vedic myth marks the termination of the *Mahābhārata*.

The epic's principal characters thus seem to be a group of divinities and supernatural beings making a one-time mass *ad hoc* appearance on earth, apparently returning whence they came, in Book 18, upon the completion of their task. But in addition to the characters' Vedic identities as transposed *devas* and *asuras*, there is a basic assumption that they are also subject to the impersonal laws of *karma* and transmigration, and as such are also treated as ordinary beings existing in *saṁsāra*. The characters are occasionally said to suffer retribution in the present life for morally flawed deeds done in the past (less frequently, in past lives); even within the limited scope of the two final books, former bad deeds are invoked by Yudhiṣṭhira in explaining to Bhīma the various fates of his family members, while Yudhiṣṭhira in turn is given several explanations for the vision of hell which equally appeal to his past moral failings. Set against a basic world-view which ties human agency to the mechanisms of *karma*, the principal events of the *Mahābhārata* are tragically compelling because of the flawed and mortal nature of its principal characters, and the helplessness of the poem's all-too-human actors in the face of the forces of fate and destiny are a common theme of the poem.[191]

This human dimension of the epic characters' identities is simultaneous with the understanding that they are divinities engendered on earth, and so naturally one expects to find some tension wherever the issue of their actual or final identities is broached. When we arrive at the 18.5 passage at the end of the *Mahābhārata*, the text itself betrays that this is indeed an issue requiring clarification, and Janamejaya asks: What really happened to them when they died? The reply to this important question is not clear in the Critical Edition text. Our first task in this chapter, then, is to consult the available materials carefully in order to ensure that we have as clear a reading as possible of Vaiśaṁpāyana's answer. Subsequently we may return, in section 4.3, to the broader issue of the *Mahābhārata*'s Vedic casting.

4.2.1. The Vulgate Text of *Mahābhārata* 18.5 with Nīlakaṇṭha's Commentary

The portion of text at the heart of this issue is 18.5.1-11 of the Vulgate edition of the *Mahābhārata* (the Critical Edition's rendering of this passage will be taken up subsequently). Our first step will be to simply take the Vulgate text as used by the

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[191] This is a recurring issue in *Mahābhārata* studies. See J. Bruce Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the Mahābhārata." in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 38-60; Arvind Sharma, "Fate and Free Will in the Bhagavadgītā." *Religious Studies* 15 (1984): 531-537; Saroj Bharadwaj, *The Concept of "Daiva" in the* Mahābhārata (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1992); Julian F. Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

commentator Nīlakaṇṭha at face value and allow him to illuminate the meaning of this passage according to his lights. Here it is important to remember that Nīlakaṇṭha himself was the "editor," as it were, of the text upon which he was commenting (now available to us in the Vulgate text), and as such it is important to consult his commentary whenever possible where the Vulgate's reading differs appreciably from the Critical Edition's, as it does in the case of the 18.5 dialogue. Once we have understood Nīlakaṇṭha's rendering of Vaiśaṃpāyana's reply, we can consult other editions' readings of the passage and offer a competing interpretation to that of Nīlakaṇṭha.

18.5 opens with the words of Janamejaya (Vulgate 18.5.1-6):

bhīṣmadroṇau mahātmānau dhṛtarāṣṭraś ca pārthivaḥ |
virāṭadrupadau cobhau śaṅkhaś caivottaras tathā || 1
dhṛṣṭaketur jayatseno rājā caiva sa satyajit |
duryodhanasutāś caiva śakuniś caiva saubalaḥ || 2
karṇaputrāś ca vikrāntā rājā caiva jayadrathaḥ |
ghaṭotkacādayaś caiva ye cānye nānukīrtitāḥ || 3
ye cānye kīrtitā vīrā rājāno dīptamūrtayaḥ |
svarge kālaṃ kiyantaṃ te tasthus tad api śaṃsu me || 4
āho svic chāśvataṃ sthānaṃ teṣāṃ tatra dvijottama |
ante vā karmaṇāṃ kāṃ te gatiṃ prāptā nararṣabhāḥ || 5
etad icchāmy ahaṃ śrotuṃ procyamānaṃ dvijottama |
tapasā hi pradīptena sarvaṃ tvam anupaśyasi || 6

Great-souled Bhīṣma and Droṇa, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, both Virāṭa and Drupada, likewise Śaṅkha and Uttara as well, Dhṛṣṭaketu Jayatsena, and that King Satyajit, the sons of Duryodhana and Śakuni son of Subala, the courageous sons of Karṇa, and King Jayadratha, and [all] those such as Ghaṭotkaca, those others who were not told of, and those other celebrated hero-kings of blazing forms — for how much time did they stay in heaven, tell me. Was their place there really eternal, O best of the twice born? Or [if not then] what path did those bulls of men finally obtain at the end of their *karmas*? O best of the twice-born, I want to hear this spoken by you who are bright with *tapas*. You see everything.

By "the end of their *karmas*," Janamejaya means the merit which has brought them to heaven, but which, being finite, will sooner or later run out. Where will they go when that happens? Vaiśaṃpāyana gives his reply:

na śakyaṃ karmaṇām ante sarveṇa manujādhipa |
prakṛtiṃ kiṃ nu samyak te pṛcchaiṣā samprayojitā || 8
śṛṇu guhyam idaṃ rājan devānāṃ bharatarṣabha |
yad uvāca mahātejā divyacakṣuḥ pratāpavān || 9
muniḥ purāṇaḥ kauravya pārāśaryo mahāvrataḥ |
agādhabuddhiḥ sarvajño gatijñaḥ sarvakarmaṇām || 10

tenoktaṁ karmaṇām ante praviśanti svikāṁ tanum |

It was not possible for everyone [to return] to their true nature (*prakṛti*) at the end of their *karmas* ("*karmaṇām ante*"); however this question was indeed properly brought forth by you, O king.[192] O Bull of the Bharatas, hear this secret of the gods which the ancient sage [Vyāsa] spoke, [who is] possessed of great splendour and divine eye, the glorious descendent of Parāśara, [faithful to his] great vows, deep in wisdom, knower of all, and knower of the paths of all deeds. It was said by him that they [the heroes] entered their forms [*tanu*] at the end of their deeds.

For the moment I will follow Nīlakaṇtha's lead and read the *kiṁ nu* of 8c ("whether indeed? ..." — usually an interrogative) as *kiṁ tu* ("but," "however"). The *baṅgla* Vulgate edition[193] in fact provides *kiṁ tu* in place of *kiṁ nu* — but we will return to this phrase subsequently. For transparency the passage requires the addition of an infinitive (*prati +√gam*, passive) to construe with the instrumental pronoun *sarveṇa* and the object *prakṛti*: "True nature was not able [to be gone back to] by all of them/everyone," or "Not all of them were able [to return to] their true nature." For Nīlakaṇtha, Janamejaya's question and the reply he gets are a matter of some interest and so he digs into the issue that he thinks is bothering Janamejaya and which precipitates this exchange. Due to the extremely terse and formulaic style of the commentary, a lengthy elucidation of the argument follows the basic translation presented here.[194]

pūrvasminn adhyāye yo yo yodho yasya yasya devasyāṁśaḥ sa svargaṁ gatvā svasya svasyāṁśinaḥ sānnidhyaṁ prāpety uktam | In the preceding *adhyāya* it was said that each warrior who [had been] the portion of a given *deva* reached proximity to that respective [*deva*] of which he was a portion, after having gone to heaven.

tatra saṁśayaḥ kim ete aṁśāḥ kāṇḍaruhāṇāṁ vṛkṣāṇām aṁśā iva pṛthak saṁsāritvaṁ prāptā uta teṣv evāṁśiṣu līyante | So, a doubt [arises]: is it the case that these portions reached a saṁsāric state individually like branches of Kāṇḍaruh [-type] trees, or rather were they absorbed right into the [*devas* of whom they were] portions?

ādye karmajadehaparamparāyās tattvajñānam antarenocchedāyogāt teṣāṁ nityasaṁsāritvam asmadādivat syāt I In the first [case], [the portions] would have a permanent saṁsāric state, as do we and other [creatures], from carrying out the breaking-off — the doctrine of limitless bodies born from *karma* [constituting proof for this].

dvitīye mānuṣyabhāve taih kṛtānāṁ karmaṇāṁ nāśāpattir iti saṁdihāno janamejayah pṛcchati — bhīṣmadroṇāv iti II 1 II In the second [case], [there would be] the destruction of deeds done by them in their human lives [and so] Janamejaya, confused [on this point], asks [the question beginning at 18.5.1a, namely] **"Bhīṣma and Droṇa..."**

te ante kāṁ gatiṁ puṇyabhogānte aṁśinā saha aikyaṁ vā sālokyaṁ vā śāśvataṁ prāpnuvanti uta bhūmāv avatarantīti praśnah II 5 II The question [at 18.5.5cd, namely] "At the end, what path did they [reach]...?" [really means]: At the end of the enjoyment of their merit, did they attain unity with those of whom they were a portion, or eternal co-dwelling with them — or rather did they descend to earth?

atrottaram āha — na śakyam iti I Here the reply is [what is stated at 18.5.8, namely] **"not able..."**

karmaṇām ante sarveṇa prakṛtiṁ pratigantuṁ na śakyam ity adhyāhṛtya yojyam I [The sentence] is to be construed having supplied [the verb] "to return": not all of them were able *to return* to their true nature at the end of their deeds.

yadi sarvo'pi jantuh prārabdhakarmānte svāṁ prakṛtiṁ gacchet tarhi sarve'pi muktāh syuh saṁsāraś cādimān bhavet I If every creature would go to its own true nature at the end of its *prārabdha-karma*, then they would all be liberated, and *saṁsāra* would have a beginning.

tataś ca kṛtahānākṛtābhyāgamaprasaṁgo vidhipratiṣedha-śāstrānarthakyaṁ ca I And then [there would be] the error of the enjoyment of what was not done, the disappearance of what was done, and meaninglessness of the authoritative legal texts giving pre- and proscriptive injunctions.

tasmāt kecid eva karmaṇām ante svāṁ prakṛtiṁ bhajante na sarve iti kiṁ tarhi ye prakṛtiṁ na prāptās tān uddiśya te tvayaiṣā pṛcchā samyak prayojitā II 8 II Therefore [it is the case] that only some experienced their true nature at the end of their deeds, not all. However, "this question is rightly raised by you" [18.5.8cd], i.e. with respect to those who did not reach their true nature.

tatra kāṁścit svargaprāpakakarmaṇām ante svaih svair aṁśibhis tādātmyaṁ prāptuṁ yogyān yogajadṛṣṭyā paśyan parigaṇayati — śṛṇvity ādinā I So, seeing by means of an insight born from *yoga* those ones who were fit to attain, at the end of the deeds which brought them to heaven, identity with the respective ones of whom they were a portion, he enumerates them: **"Hear ..."**, **and so on** [18.5.9].

arthād itare svargaṁ gatā api punaś cyavante ete tu uttarām uttarām ūrdhvordhvakrameṇa gatiṁ prāpya ante brahmaṇā saha mucyante | On the other hand, [there are] those ones who, although gone to heaven, fall back [to earth] again, but they are liberated along with *brahman* in the end, having reached the path [of liberation] by an ever-increasing, higher-and-higher progress.

tena devatvaprāptaye karmāṇi yajñadānatapaādīni kartavyāny eva na coktadoṣa iti sarvam anavadyam || 9 || Therefore the deeds of sacrifice, giving, asceticism, and so on, should certainly be carried out for the sake of acquiring divinity, and the fault mentioned does not [apply]; everything is in order.

In the *mūla* or principal text preceding the conversation, we have learned that the heroes have died and gone to heaven. It is understood that their time in paradise has been won through meritorious deeds performed while living their earthly lives, but what will happen when this merit is exhausted? All of the characters in question are each a portion (*aṁśa*) of a *deva*, and after death they return to heaven and meet up with their respective progenitors (*aṁśin*). In 18.4 this return-process is described, but a doubt arises as to what is actually happening. The exact nature of the relationship between *aṁśa* and *aṁśin* is bothering Janamejaya, and Nīlakaṇtha phrases the problem in the following way.

On the one hand the relationship between the heroes and their parent-divinities might be conceived along the lines of the branches of a "*kāṇḍaruh*" or "growing-from-the-branch" tree, i.e. they might be like the limbs of trees which reproduce not by seeds but by dropping entire branches or portions. The image Nīlakaṇtha deploys here is of the heroes initially growing like branches from the "trunks" of their paternal *devas*, breaking off (*uccheda-āyoga*) at the time of death, but taking root to form a new tree of their own afterwards. If this were the case, and if we accept the doctrine of perpetual saṁsāric life rooted in *karma* (this is a given for Nīlakaṇtha), then their fate would simply be one of normal saṁsāric existence, no different from us mere mortals: the new tree would grow and lose branches of its own, and there would be no end to it. Is this what happened to them at the end of their *karmas* or meritorious deeds?

Alternately, the heroes may be thought to be entirely reunited with their *aṁśins*. But, Nīlakaṇtha observes, if they are reabsorbed into their parent-divinities once their heavenly merits have worn off, that would mean that they experience neither good nor bad results of deeds done on earth (i.e. they would never experience the fruits of their "*āgamin-karmas*" or deeds, done in the then-just-ending lifetime, which only bear fruit in subsequent lifetimes. Janamejaya is thus confused about all this, and hence asks Vaiśaṁpāyana the aforementioned question. "What path? (*kāṁ gatiṁ*?)" thus means, in Nīlakaṇtha's reading: Once they had exhausted their *karmas* or meritorious deeds, which of these two fates befell them? (a) unity with those of whom they were a portion (or eternal co-

dwelling in heaven along with them, a similar fate), or rather did they (b) descend (back) to earth to be reborn?

For Nīlakaṇṭha the answer to Janamejaya's question is generic and refers to all creatures and not just the *Mahābhārata* characters: not everyone is able [to return] to their true nature at the end of their deeds. It is at this point that Nīlakaṇṭha rolls up his philosopher's sleeves and takes up the broader issue of how *karma* functions at the moment of death. Reading the text from an Advaita philosophical perspective, he takes the pronoun *sarva* (all, everyone) as referring to living beings in general, and similarly seems to understand by *prakṛti* a general state of liberation or *mokṣa*, and not merely a reference to the unity between *aṃśa* and *aṃśin* of the *Mahābhārata* characters. But more significant is Nīlakaṇṭha's introduction of the term *prārabdhakarma*, glossed over the simple term *karma* appearing in the principal text. According to the Vedānta and other philosophical systems, there are several varieties of *karma*, or to be more precise, karmic residues (*saṃskāras*). Of these, three important varieties are *prārabdha*, *sañcita* and *sañcīyamāna* or *āgamin*.[195] The first of these are the karmic residues which have determined the present life form and actively fructify in the present lifetime; their exhaustion is simultaneous with the termination of that lifespan. The second type of karmic residue, *sañcita*, consists of latent accumulated *karmas* from past lives which will not fructify in the present lifetime, but for some reason or another are being postponed until a later life. The third is the variety we have mentioned already, namely *sañcīyamāna* or *āgamin*, the residues of acts performed in the present lifetime which will fructify in a later lifetime. According to this typology then, when one speaks of "the end of one's *karmas*" — *karmaṇām ante* — occuring at the end of one's life, one is necessarily speaking of *prārabdhakarma*, since the other two types refer to residues that by definition do not come to fruition in the present lifetime. For Nīlakaṇṭha, then, Janamejaya and Vaiśaṃpāyana could only be speaking of *prārabdhakarma*, and hence he frames the whole debate around this issue.

Once committed to this reading (*karma* = *prārabdhakarma*), there is a need for Nīlakaṇṭha to follow through with this understanding of *karma*, which does not allow the possibility that the exhaustion of *prārabdhakarma* necessarily leads to liberation in all creatures. If indeed all creatures were to return to their true nature at the end of their *prārabdhakarmas*, they would all be liberated and *saṃsāra* would "have a beginning." This is a *reductio ad absurdum* argument: if death always meant liberation and every creature until now that has died was in fact liberated at the moment of death, none of them would ever have returned to

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[195] For early treatments of this *karma* typology, see, e.g., *Brahmasūtra* 4.1.13-19 and the accompanying gloss of Śaṅkara; Śaṅkara's gloss on *Brahmasūtra* 3.3.32; Śaṅkara's gloss on *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 6.14.2 and Śaṅkara's gloss on *Bhagavadgītā* 3.20. See also Karl H. Potter, "Karma Theory in Some Indian Philosophical Systems," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 241-267.

another earthly life, and consequently we would have the ludicrous situation that all presently existing beings have come into existence out of nothing, with a "karmic bank account" of $0. All existing creatures would thus have entered saṁsāric existence at a definite point in time, and this would mean that *saṁsāra* is "*ādi-mat*" or possessed of a beginning — a preposterous idea. It would also mean that *sañcita* and *āgamin karmas* never come to fruition and hence all the *śāstras* or authoritative legal texts which are premised upon this system of automatic retributive justice were wrong. But of course this is not how things work: *sañcita* and *āgamin karmas* are operative as well and hence the exhaustion of *prārabdhakarma* does not necessarily mean liberation.

Nīlakaṇṭha asserts that although it is true that some people do experience liberation upon exhausting their *prārabdhakarmas*, not everyone can do so. Although Nīlakaṇṭha does not state it explicitly, he might well have in mind here the *jīvanmukta* or person liberated while alive, who is simply burning off the last remnants of *prārabdhakarmas* of the current life, but will attain complete emancipation at death. It was therefore quite right of Janamejaya to ask about those who do not reach their true nature once they have used up these *prārabdhakarmas*. Again, Nīlakaṇṭha is here reading the *kiṁ nu* of the principal text as *kiṁ tu*: *kiṁ tarhi* ("but," "however," "yet") is his gloss.

Who then are these favored ones able to return to their true nature once they have used up all their heavenly merit? Vaiśaṁpāyana, having a special insight born from *yoga*, is able to identify them, and hence he goes on to enumerate them. This is the list of names of *Mahābhārata* characters beginning at 18.5.11cd of the Vulgate. And so in the end some few lucky people do attain their *prakṛti* when their *prārabdhakarma* is all used up in heaven (18.5.11cd-30 being a list of such people). Presumably this means that the last karmic *saṁskāras* they are subject to are meritorious *prārabdha-karmas*, and they have no *sañcita* or *āgamin karmas* to deal with once this merit is used up.

However, Nīlakaṇṭha insists that there are still people who experience heavenly rewards but then have to come back and take more births on account of their *sañcita* and *āgamin karmas*. But these less fortunate ones may nonetheless still attain liberation along with *brahman* once they have reached a higher and higher path by ascending stages. The way to this liberation is through the meritorious works of sacrifice, giving, asceticism and the like, and these good deeds could still be done by those not attaining liberation directly from heaven. And so the apparent problem that was worrying Janamejaya (i.e. that these heroes, whom he thought were divine, would end up like us mere mortals, cut off from returning to divinity like dropped branches perpetually growing into new trees) has been dismissed, and everything is in order.

To recap Nīlakaṇṭha's rendering of the passage: Janamejaya has heard in the preceding chapter about the epic's characters arriving in heaven, but he is not sure what is really taking place. They are near (*sānnidhya*) their parent-divinities — but will they be fully reunited with them? Are they there permanently, or will

they be reborn in *saṁsāra*? If they do return to their divine state directly from heaven, would that not mean they have bypassed the *sañcita-* and *āgamin-karmas* as yet not come to fruition? Vaiśaṁpāyana's reply to the question is: only some people may achieve liberation upon exhausting their *prārabdha-karma*, i.e. those who have burned off their *sañcita* and *āgamin karmas* and are in their final saṁsāric existence. The list of names beginning at 18.5.11cd are an example of people who have achieved this. Others will have to be reborn and keep trying. But through performing the right rituals and deeds, we can burn off *sañcita* and *āgamin karmas* while in our saṁsāric existence, so as to be left only with *prārabdha karmas*, and when these are exhausted, finally attain release. Janamejaya can now rest easy.

I do not claim to have fully grasped the finer points of Nīlakaṇṭha's reading, but it should be clear that for him this portion of the *Mahābhārata* illustrates some basic tenets of the doctrine of *karma* as understood in more developed and philosophical terms. For Nīlakaṇṭha, Janamejaya and Vaiśaṁpāyana become *pūrvapakṣin* (a hypothesized philosophical opponent who phrases the question to be resolved) and *uttarapakṣin* (respondent thereto), setting up the problem and solving a key issue of philosophy. The *Mahābhārata*'s characters are for Nīlakaṇṭha exemplary of all living beings, subject to the same laws of the universe as we are, and this little exchange between narrator and king is an appropriately placed instruction on how *karma* functions at the end of one's life.

Although I fear I may be repeating an old pattern of scholarly attitudes toward Nīlakaṇṭha, I would have to characterize his reading of the *Mahābhārata* text as "anachronistic."[196] By this I of course do not intend to charge him with "corrupting" the text or somehow being "blind" to its original meaning — his work as a commentator is a self-conscious effort to identify and draw out meaning from a text understood to be exemplary and instructive. However, in what follows I will present arguments conflicting with Nīlakaṇṭha's reading, in part on the basis of elements which he himself has brought to the foreground in his own gloss. I hope thereby to defend the following reading of the 18.5 section: *all* of the *Mahābhārata* characters did return to their *prakṛtis* at the end of their *karmas*; they are not at all exemplary of living beings as conceived in the usual way, and in fact the *raison d'être* of the question and answer exchange is to restate a fact about the *Mahābhārata* characters which the epic's authors seem to have felt needed repeating in these final verses: the characters' nature as partial incarnations of divinities is of primary importance, while their nature as human beings subject to *karma* and rebirth is of little importance once the epic reaches its conclusion. Nīlakaṇṭha's emphasis is quite the reverse and his assumption of the primacy of the laws of *karma* is the source of confusion that necessitates his

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[196] For a review of Western scholarly attitudes towards Nīlakaṇṭha (and, in my view, the most helpful English work on Nīlakaṇṭha in general to date), see Minkowski, "What Makes a Work 'Traditional'?," 225-252.

gloss. Here once again I hope to demonstrate that if we do not respect the Vedic nature of the text, we may misunderstand what is happening to the characters. Nīlakaṇṭha's representation of the heroes' afterlife fates, premised squarely upon Vedāntic philosophical concepts unknown in the *Mahābhārata*, illustrates precisely how we may misread this key closing scene if we overlook the poem's Vedic background.

4.2.2. The Critical and Other Editions of *Mahābhārata* 18.5

The reason we began with the Vulgate text and Nīlakaṇṭha's reading thereof is because the Critical Edition's rendering of Vaiśaṃpāyana's reply is not entirely clear. Now we must look closely at the text of 18.5 as constituted in the Critical Edition, as well as the southern edition of P.P.S. Sastri, and the "Kumbakonam" southern edition. Comparing these three renderings of the passage with the Vulgate will bring some important details to light and help us clarify exactly what Vaiśaṃpāyana's reply is.

The question posed by Janamejaya at the start of this passage ("For how much time did they stay in heaven, tell me. Was their place there really eternal, O best of the twice born? Or [if not then] what path did those bulls of men finally obtain at the end of their *karmas*? (*svarge kālaṁ kiyantaṁ te tasthus tad api śaṁsa me | aho svic chāśvataṁ sthānaṁ teṣāṁ tatra dvijottama | ante vā karmaṇāṁ kāṁ te gatiṁ prāptā nararṣabhāḥ |*) is identical in all four editions, the only variant being *karmaṇaḥ* (genitive singular) for *karmaṇāṁ* (genitive plural) in the Critical Edition and Sastri's southern edition (SS). There are however significant variants (indicated in bold) in the answer given by Vaiśaṃpāyana:

Vulgate (Vu):[197]
*na **śakyaṁ** karmaṇām ante **sarveṇa** manujādhipa |*
***prakṛtiṁ kiṁ nu samyak te pṛcchaiṣā saṁprayojitā** || 8*
śṛṇu guhyam idaṁ rājan devānāṁ bharatarṣabha |
yad uvāca mahātejā divyacakṣuḥ pratāpavān || 9
muniḥ purāṇaḥ kauravya pārāśaryo mahāvrataḥ |
agādhabuddhiḥ sarvajño gatijñaḥ sarvakarmaṇām || 10
***tenoktaṁ karmaṇām ante praviśanti svikāṁ tanum** |*
vasūn eva mahātejā bhīṣmaḥ prāpa mahādyutiḥ... || 11

Critical Edition (CE):
***gantavyaṁ** karmaṇām ante **sarveṇa** manujādhipa |*
śṛṇu guhyam idaṁ rājan devānāṁ bharatarṣabha |

[197] As noted above, the only difference between *nāgari* and *baṅgla* Vulgates is "*kiṁ nu*" in former and "*kiṁ tu*" in the latter.

yad uvāca mahātejā divyacakṣuḥ pratāpavān || 7
muniḥ purāṇaḥ kauravya pārāśaryo mahāvratah |
agādhabuddhiḥ sarvajño gatijñaḥ sarvakarmaṇām || 8
vasūn eva mahātejā bhīṣmaḥ prāpa mahādyutiḥ... | 9ab

P.P.S Sastri Southern (PPS):
gantavyaṁ *karmaṇām ante* **sarveṣāṁ** *manujādhipa* |
śṛṇu guhyam idaṁ rājan devānāṁ bharatarṣabha || 8
trailokyadarśī yogī ca divyacakṣuḥ pratāpavān |
muniḥ purāṇaḥ kauravya pārāśaryo mahāvratah || 9
agādhabuddhis sarvajño gatijñas sarvakarmaṇām || 9 [*sic*]
vasūneva mahātejā bhīṣmaḥ prāpa mahādyutiḥ...| 10 ab

Kumbakonam Southern (KS):
gantavyaṁ *karmaṇām ante* **sarveṣāṁ** *manujādhipa* |
śṛṇu guhyam idaṁ rājan devānāṁ bharatarṣabha |
yad uvāca mahātejā divyacakṣuḥ pratāpavān || 8
muniḥ purāṇaḥ kauravya pārāśaryo mahāvratah |
agādhabuddhiḥ sarvajño gatijñaḥ sarvakarmaṇām || 9
tenoktaṁ karmaṇām ante praviśanti svikāṁ tanum || 10
vasūn eva mahātejā bhīṣmaḥ prāpa mahādyutiḥ... | 11 ab

In the Vulgate text, no verb occurs in verse 8 and hence, as we saw above, Nīlakaṇṭha supplies one in his commentary: *pratigantum*, that is, the infinitive form of *prati*+ √*gam*, "to go back," "to return." Construed with the pronoun *sarva* in the instrumental case (*sarveṇa*: "by all," "by everyone"), the infinitive must be read in the passive: "to be returned [to]," "to be gone back [to]." The object of this glossed-in verb is *prakṛti* ("true nature"). The whole construction is preceded by "*na śakyaṁ*" ("not able," "incapable"), yielding the sentence: "True nature is not able [to be returned to] by everyone."

The phrase "*na śakyaṁ*" does not occur in the CE, PPS and KS editions. In its place, all three editions offer the verb √*gam*, "to go," in gerundive form: *gantavyam*, lit. "[which] should be gone [to]." Also absent in the CE, PPS and KS is the object *prakṛti*. And so in these three editions, *something* is to-be-gone-to, in other words is accessible or worthy of being approached, but what it is is not specified. This could also be phrased "they should all go" or "they all had to go." So far the CE, PPS and KS seem to say the opposite of what Nīlakaṇṭha would have us believe. The content of Vaiśampāyana's answer in the CE, PPS and KS seems to be "all of them had to go to: [?] at the end of their deeds."

Furthermore, what exactly the "secret of the gods" consists of in the CE, PPS and KS editions is not clear, but the list of names beginning at CE 9ab is not a likely candidate. However the Vu and KS seem to make the content of the

secret: "*karmaṇām ante praviśanti svikāṁ tanum*: they entered their own bodies/forms at the end of their deeds." Meanwhile this phrase is absent in the CE and PPS, leaving the reader with a vague sense that "all of them had to go to: [?] at the end of their deeds" is itself the big secret. This is not a very satisfying reading. When read against the Vulgate, however, there is a sense that the CE, PPS and KS are pointing us in quite the other direction that Nīlakaṇṭha would have us look: All of them did go to their original forms (*svikām tanum*) at the end of their *karmas*, in fact this is a "secret" (*guhyam*).

When the material of these four editions is taken together, the only element supporting Nīlakaṇṭha's reading is the "*na śakyam*" at 18.5.8a of the Vulgate. We have seen that he reads the phrase "*na śakyaṁ karmaṇām ante sarveṇa ... prakṛtiṁ kiṁ nu samyak te pṛcchaiṣā saṁprayojitā*" as "It is not possible for everyone [to return] to their true nature at the end of their (*prārabdha*)*karma*; however this question was indeed properly brought forth by you." This requires changing *kiṁ nu* (an interrogative "whether indeed?," "is it really true...?") into *kiṁ tu* ("but," "however"). But if we respect the actual reading, the phrase "*kiṁ nu samyak te pṛcchā eṣā saṁprayojitā*" can be construed with the preceding "*na śakyaṁ karmaṇām ante sarveṇa...prakṛtiṁ*" as a clause: "It is quite right of you to ask *whether indeed* everyone was able (or not) to return to their true nature at the end of their *karmas*."[198] Vaiśaṁpāyana is paraphrasing Janamejaya's question: "You suspect the heroes were not able to return to their primordial state after their accumulated merit was exhausted, and so inquire thus — that's a good question." But then the answer must be affirmative, and is a "secret of the gods": *karmaṇām ante praviśanti svikāṁ tanum* — they did enter their own bodies or forms at the end of their *karmas*. We now find in Nīlakaṇṭha's own Vulgate text what the other editions seem to be hinting at in their somewhat muddy and truncated way: the characters of the *Mahābhārata* were *all* reabsorbed into their original divinities once they had used up all their remaining *karmas*.

But let us not premise too much on small phrases and words, for the moment let it suffice to note that the other published editions of the *Mahābhārata* seem to say, against Nīlakaṇṭha's reading, that all the *Mahābhārata* characters were reabsorbed into their original forms at the end of their *karmas*, and that the Vulgate text itself may be read in this way as well if we respect the reading *kiṁ nu* and make thereby the line 18.5.8ab a clause. But there is more substantial evidence for this claim, in part brought to light by Nīlakaṇṭha himself.

A close analysis of the material preceding and following this knotty little question and answer will help provide a stronger basis for disagreeing with our commentator. In the preceding *adhyāya* (18.4), we hear that Yudhiṣṭhira, upon

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[198] Ganguli reads *kiṁ nu* and not *kiṁ tu*: "Whether this is so or not is, indeed a good question asked by thee," but then still follows Nīlakaṇṭha's reading in asserting that "not all were able..." Pratap Chandra Roy, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa: Translated into English prose* [by Kisari Mohan Ganguli] *from the original Sanskrit text*. (vol. 12. Calcutta: Oriental Publishing, 1962), 289.

arriving in heaven, had seen several of his friends and family in various heavenly places, and they are still recognizable to him. The first to be spotted are Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna; he then sees Karṇa accompanied by *(sahita)* the 12 Ādityas; Bhīma is surrounded by the troop of *maruts* *(marudgaṇavṛtaṁ)*; Nakula and Sahadeva are in the place of the Aśvins *(aśvinoḥ ... sthāne)*; Bhīṣma is accompanied by the *vasus* *(vasubhiḥ sahitaṁ)*, Droṇa is "at the side of" Bṛhaspati *(bṛhaspateḥ pārśve)*, and so on. The divinity or divinities with whom each character is associated here are of course the ones from whom the heroes were said to have descended to earth as incarnations, as described at 1.58-61 in the Critical Edition. The language describing the relationship with these gods here is one of proximity, closeness, being with or accompanied by them *(sahita)*, surrounded by a group of them *(vṛta)*, etc. Nīlakaṇṭha himself draws attention to this fact at the start of his gloss in stating that this *adhyāya* speaks of proximity — *sānnidhya* — between the heroes and their parent-divinities.

However, following the short question and answer between Janamejaya and Vaiśaṁpāyana, we have yet another list of names (Vu 18.5.11-29 / CE 18.5.9-24). The language here indicates reabsorption, the collapse of individual identities and returning of the parts to the whole. Hence Bhīṣma returns to the *vasus* and there are now only 8 to be seen *(aṣṭāv eva hi dṛśyante vasavo)*; Droṇa is no longer at the side of, but "absorbed into" (√*viś*) Bṛhaspati; similarly Virāṭa and a host of others are all said to be reabsorbed into the individual gods from whom they descended *(viśveṣāṁ devatānāṁ te viviśuḥ)*; most other characters are said to be absorbed into their original forms *(pra + √viś)*, or to have "reached" them *(pra + √āp)*, or else "become" *(√bhū)* *gandharvas*, *apsaras*es, *yakṣa*s and so on. Here the language is clearly of "entering," reabsorption, becoming one with, etc. and not of proximity or association. In fact we have already seen that Nīlakaṇṭha reads this list as illustrating those elite few who were able to attain their *prakṛti* at the end of their *prārabdha-karma*. Although he declares that there must have been people who were reborn into saṁsāric existence after exhausting their heavenly merit, the names listed here describe those whom Nīlakaṇṭha defines as "suited to attain identity each to his own *aṁśin* at the end of the *karmas* which had caused them to reach heaven" *(svargaprāpakakarmaṇām ante svaiḥ svair aṁśibhis tādātmyaṁ prāptuṁ yogyān)*. As we have seen, however, this list includes the names of people already mentioned in *adhyāya* 4, thus precluding the possibility that the earlier set describes only those able to attain proximity to their parent divinities (the purported "*na śakyaṁ ... prakṛti*" group) and the later list describing those able to return fully.

Finally, in the [Vu 18.5.11-29 / CE 18.5.9-24] list there is no mention of anything like a worldy rebirth for any character, nor is there talk of *mokṣa* as conceived in classical Hinduism: the issues of *karma*, rebirth, and final liberation

from saṁsāric existence simply are not the issue here.[199] Instead each character is said to return / be reabsorbed into the parent-divinity of whom they were a portion, or else become once again the *gandharva*, *apsaras*, etc. they had been before the great descent described at 1.58-61. There is no sense here of anyone being unable (*na śakyam*) to return to his or her *prakṛti*. Although the text does not specify what exactly was going on in the earlier "proximity" phase of heaven described in *adhyāya* 4, the idea would seem to be that the characters are simply enjoying the merits of the good deeds done while they inhabited earth, an enjoyment-state which precedes, but temporarily precludes, total reunification with their divine origins, and lasting until these deeds or *karma*s are exhausted. And so for example we initially find Yudhiṣṭhira being encouraged to "receive the great fruit of asceticism and the worlds won through the performance of the Rājasūya and Aśvamedha rites" (18.3.23), which he apparently does, but subsequently he and his step-brother Vidura are entirely reabsorbed into the god Dharma (*dharmam evāviśat kṣattā rājā caiva yudhiṣṭhiraḥ*). It would seem, then, that the exchange between Janamejaya and Vaiśaṁpāyana functions to distinguish between two phases of afterlife for the epic's heroes: heavenly merit-enjoyment and final reunification with divinity.

To repeat, then, *contra* Nīlakaṇṭha, our reading of this important passage: Janamejaya is quite right to ask whether or not the *Mahābhārata* characters returned to their *prakṛti* at the end of their *karma*s. Here there are no grounds for glossing *prārabdha-karma* over the word *karma*, as the *Mahābhārata* does not know this term or betray any sign of familiarity with such sophisticated conceptions of *karma* (hence the aforementioned charge of "anachronism" against Nīlakaṇṭha), while *prakṛti* refers not to *mokṣa* but simply the *aṁśin*s or parent divinities from whom the characters descended. The answer to this question is a secret of the gods: they all re-entered their divine forms once these *karma*s came to an end. Exactly who went where is then described in detail, and we hear nothing more about any of the epic's heroes.

As such the characters ultimately return to and are reunited with their respective *aṁśin*s, a post-death fate not at all exemplary of living beings as conceived by later philosophical understandings of *karma* and *saṁsāra*. But the simultaneity of conceptions as to the nature of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters — partial incarnations or descendants of divinities as well as human agents subject to the laws of *karma* and *saṁsāra* — creates a philosophical problem and hence prompts a substantial gloss from Nīlakaṇṭha. I would suggest that the purpose of the question and answer exchange is to raise and resolve this issue of the *Mahābhārata* characters' final identities and close the mythic frame structured around the map of partial incarnations. Although Nīlakṇtha's comments are instructive and ultimately help us to arrive at a clearer reading of the Critical

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[199] The closest we come to any such conception is the adjective *kramaśas*, "gradually," "eventually," which qualifies the arrival of Duryodhana and his companions in the heavenly realms (18.5.23c).

Edition text, I would propose that the heroes' nature as human beings subject to *karma* and rebirth is of little importance once we arrive at the conclusion of the poem. Far more important is the restoration of each character to his or her respective *aṁśin*. But the fact that the author of Book 18 placed such an "astute query" (*samyak ... pṛcchaiṣā samprayojitā*) in the mouth of Janamejaya would seem to indicate that the matter was in need of clarification. Vaiśampāyana does clear things up, and in his reply we see that, whatever else might have appeared relevant in defining the characters' post-death fates, the authors' principal concern was to reconfirm the heroes' identities within the broader scheme of Vedic myth that underlies the epic narrative.

4.3.1. The "Mythologization" of the *Mahābhārata*

Above I have attempted to articulate as precisely as possible the answer to Janamejaya's question, as well as the reasons for why the question is put in his mouth in the first place. But the issues raised above must now be approached from a broader theoretical perspective: Why does the *Mahābhārata* have such a complex and multivalent conception of its heroes? Why does the mythic framework — the age-old battle between gods and demons and the relieving of the burden of the Earth — overlay the action of the *Mahābhārata* story, which is otherwise so thoroughly human? In seeking to understand why the *Mahābhārata* ends the way it does, we must pursue this issue and gauge the extent to which the mythic framework actually determines the poem's narrative and character identities.

One possible response to this issue is to hypothesize that the mythic framework of the *Mahābhārata* is the result of a secondary reworking of the text which had hitherto conceived the characters in simpler terms. According to this hypothesis, the *Mahābhārata* would have undergone a "mythologization," or recasting whereby the poem's events came to be seen as having significance on a grander mythic or cosmic scale, and hence the existing plot and characters were assigned a new level of mythic ancestry or identity. The complex and multivalent nature of the poem's characters would be a natural result of such a reworking. In the introduction to his translation of the *Ādiparvan*, J.A.B. van Buitenen makes strong claims to this effect. It is worthwhile to cite his comments on this important issue at length:

> There is no reason at all why Bhīṣma should be the son of the river goddess, why Karṇa should be the offspring of the Sun, why the Pāṇḍavas should have been begotten by various deities. Certainly, these heroes are superhuman in the baronial tradition of epics everywhere. ... But after the composition of the central epic a newer, and less baronial, imagination could not leave it at that. Such magnanimity as Bhīṣma's

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was not merely superhuman; it was no less than divine. Bhīṣma ought
to be the incarnation of some divinity.

As usual in such pious transformations, the results are less than
gratifying; they take away a man's virtue while adding nothing to the
God's... . Such further elaborations are disappointing because they rob
the human actors of much of their motivation... . The Gods pressed into
service to explain human affairs are mostly of a venerable Vedic
antiquity, but their mythology is decaying... . Once such inept
mythification is introduced, persons and events intended thus to be
made more significant become less so; the causes that it seeks to
elucidate become the murkier... . Still, disconcerting as it is, the rather
decadent sanctification by mythology of persons standing in no need of
saintliness went on, and found its inane perfection in *The Book of the
Partial Incarnations* [Critical Edition 1.61], where every human, bad or
good, is the reappearance of demon and God. But all this makes no
difference, and is best ignored, as the epic itself does... .

Finally, this decaying mythology, with which the reader is so
needlessly presented, has a way of subtracting from the meaning of
both a newly rising mythology and of a heraldically surviving one. To
give an example of the latter: Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa (the "White" and the
"Black") are meaningfully said to be the ancient hero pair of Nara and
Nārāyaṇa, who, it would appear, are old champions of a rhapsodic
tradition drawn into *The Mahābhārata*. But in the mass of other casual
identifications this old relation hardly stands out.[200]

van Buitenen's evaluation of the *aṁśa* identities of the characters carries an odd
tone of disappointment or exasperation, and we might well expect that his reply to
our question posed above — to what extent does the mythic framework actually
determine the poem's narrative and character identities? — would be: not at all.
For van Buitenen, it "makes no difference, and is best ignored." van Buitenen's
view that the Vedic mythology in question is "decaying" and only surviving
"heradically" is seconded by Jan Gonda who refers to the poem's overarching
framework of Vedic identifications as a "transposition of an almost forgotten and
no longer actual mythologeme that could hardly serve to explain the socio-
religious situation known to the post-Vedic generations."[201]

That the *Mahābhārata* underwent a process of mythologization was also
proposed by Paul Hacker in his important 1960 article "Zur Entwicklung der
Avatāralehre."[202] This work proposes a pedigree for the Vaiṣṇava doctrine of
avatāra or descent-incarnations of Viṣṇu. In tracing the development of this
concept, Hacker posits an early form of the *Mahābhārata* wherein Kṛṣṇa is
understood to be born on earth in transmigration just like Arjuna.[203] According to

[200] van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, xix - xxi.

[201] Jan Gonda, "Dumézil's Tripartite Ideology: Some Critical Observations." *Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no.1 (1974): 143.

[202] Paul Hacker, "Zur Entwicklung der Avatāralehre," in *Paul Hacker: Kleine Schriften*, ed. Lambert Schmithausen (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1978), 404-427.

[203] Hacker cites (Ibid, 405), for example, *Mahābhārata* 6.26.5: "I [Kṛṣṇa] have had many

this hypothesis, the characters were initially understood as human beings born in saṁsāric existence, but were later "mythologized" and the aṁśa-aṁśin identities of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters were assigned in the course of a reworking of the poem. Hence the myth of the aṁśāvataraṇa in the *Ādiparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* was, according to Hacker, simply a general assignation of divine parentage to all the existing *Mahābhārata* characters. Somewhat similar to van Buitenen's evaluation, Hacker calls this reworking "a typical example of the mythologization of the story with the intention of having the story appear *religiously* meaningful."[204]

What is important in Hacker's argument is the fact that the *Harivaṁśa*, a text appended to the end of the *Mahābhārata*,[205] also sets up the events of its narrative against the same mythic background of the portion-descent of the gods and the removal of the burden of the Earth. In particular, Hacker makes some astute observations on the language used in these mythic preamble stories of the *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṁśa*. Both texts use terms derived from ava+√tṛ, "to descend," "to come down across," to describe the motion of the gods coming down to earth. The descent of the gods is referred to as avataraṇa in the *Mahābhārata*[206] and *Harivaṁśa*,[207] and with this theme of avataraṇa is closely associated, in both texts, the notion of portion, aṁśa (hence the compound aṁśāvataraṇa). Also important in both texts is the motif of relieving the Earth of a burden (bhāra).

But while in the *Mahābhārata*, the "relieving" or "removing" of this burden is expressed by the verb nir+√as (1.58.46a), meaning to remove or expel (a transparent, non-technical or non-specialized term for removing or taking away), the *Harivaṁśa* expresses the same action with the compound bhārāvataraṇa (41.27; 42.39). As Hacker points out, this literally means "burden-descent," and viewed outside of this context, avataraṇa cannot carry any sense of "removal" or "taking away." But the *Harivaṁśa* coins this new phrase, under the influence of *Mahābhārata* 1.58's compound aṁśāvataraṇa, to mean "the removal of the burden." To an extent this is possible through a vague sense that avataraṇa can be read in the causative to suggest "cause to descend," i.e. make something go

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past births, Arjuna, as have you," bahūni me vyatītāni janmāni tava cārjuna.

[204] Ibid, 409 (emphasis in original).

[205] Hacker's arguments are premised on the widely accepted hypothesis that the *Harivaṁśa* is later than the *Mahābhārata*. On this subject see Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 313-344, and the works cited therein bearing on the relationship between the *Harivaṁśa* and the *Mahābhārata*: Hardy, Friedhelm. *Viraha-bhakti: the early history of Kṛṣṇa devotion in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983; André Couture, "The *Harivaṁśa*: A Supplement to the *Mahābhārata*." *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* 4, no.3 (1996): 127-138; Freda Matchett, "The *Harivaṁśa*: Supplement to the *Mahābhārata* and Independent Text." *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* 4, no.3 (1996): 139-150.

[206] 1.2.76, 1.61.99, 1.61.101-102, 1.62.1.

[207] *Harivaṁśa* 43.9, 43.62, 44.1 and 44.13. References are to the Critical Edition: *The Harivaṁśa: being the khila, or supplement to the Mahābhārata*, ed. Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969-1971).

away, but clearly it is the context which forces the noun *avataraṇa* to take on this new meaning. As such it is an unusual usage of the word, understandable only in the context of the *Harivaṁśa*'s background myth of the descent of the gods (itself inspired by the *Mahābhārata* 1.58-61 myth). Consequently, Hacker argues that from this point on the term *avataraṇa* would carry a sense of "removal (of a burden)" in addition to the natural or transparent meaning "descent."

This broadening of the meaning of "descent" to include "removal" also occurs in the *Harivaṁśa* myth with respect to the verb *ava* + √*ruh*. This also means to descend, and yet the Earth, when asking to have her burden removed, uses the phrase *bhāraḥ ... avaroptavyaḥ*, "[may] the burden descend/be descended," i.e. removed (42.53). Both *avataraṇa* and *avarohana* are now equivalent to *nirasana*. Of these two constructions, *avataraṇa* would be the one to predominate in later Vaiṣṇava usage and finally yield the term *avatāra*, carrying with it the sense of the actual event of the descent of the god Viṣṇu, the goal of removing the burden (*bhārāvataraṇa* = *bhāranirasana*), and, most importantly, the actual form assumed by Viṣṇu for that purpose.

Once Hacker establishes the influence of the *Mahābhārata*'s opening mythic framework on the *Harivaṁśa*, he then points out three passages of the *Mahābhārata* which in turn use the term *bhārāvataraṇa* in the manner of the *Harivaṁśa*, attesting thereby to a back-and-forth influence between the two texts. In two of these *Mahābhārata* passages (12.326.92 and 12.337.31), the compound *bhārāvataraṇa* appears in the *Harivaṁśa*'s sense of "removal of the burden" from the Earth. The third passage (3.45.21) occurs in reference to Nara and Nārāyaṇa, who are born as Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in order to "free the earth from a burden [*bhūmer*] *bhārāvataraṇa*." Here as well the sense of *avataraṇa* = (*bhāra*)*nirasana* is indebted to the *Harivaṁśa*.

Hacker thus understands the *Mahābhārata*'s mythic frame story as the result of a mythologization of an initially simpler epic and assignation of divine ancestry to the principal characters. Subsequently this motif of a mythic backdrop for the earthly events of the story, particularly the *aṁśāvataraṇa* myth established at 1.58-61, came to influence the *Harivaṁśa*, which likewise opens its second major section, the *Viṣṇuparvan*, with the *aṁśāvataraṇa* myth. In doing so, the *Harivaṁśa* coined a new phrase, understandable only in the context of the borrowed *aṁśāvataraṇa* story of *Mahābhārata* 1.58-61: *bhārāvataraṇa* — literally "descent of the burden," but now meaning "removal of the burden." This phrase from the *Harivaṁśa* (41.27; 42.39) in turn found its way back into a still-growing *Mahābhārata*, where it is used in three places.

There are some problems with Hacker's work,[208] but we will have occasion to revisit it below. It is worthwhile noting that Hacker's notion of a

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[208] Hacker sets up an unnecessary polarity between divine and human birth, stating that when the author of the *Mahābhārata*'s *aṁśāvataraṇa* section uses terms like √*jan* and √*bhū* (to be born, to become) to describe the characters appearance, he "failed to distinguish the *aṁśāvataraṇa* births from normal transmigratory ones (409)." As André Couture has demonstrated (André

simpler form of the *Mahābhārata* taking on a mythic casting offers much the same view as presented by van Buitenen. According to Hacker, the mythology of the removal of the Earth's burden was subsequently reflected back into the poem by the *Harivaṁśa*. A gradual development in the *Mahābhārata*'s underlying mythology — that is, an accretion process in the articulation of the poem's mythic backdrop — is thus implied.

In a similar vein, Annette Mangels suggests that the mythic ancestry of the characters might have been an element of the epic developed gradually and not as part of the poem's initial design, or as the result of a one-time act of mythologization.[209] In the process of articulating an important distinction between active and passive receptions of the epic text, she takes the example of certain synthetic-structuralist handlings of the *Mahābhārata* (*strukturale Mythenanalyse*), and points out that the very work of Dumézil and others following his lead might well exemplify how the background mythology of the epic may have developed from simpler to more complex sets of identifications. The apotheosis or divinization of the heroes may have been an ongoing process in the reception of the text, whereby once certain identities had been established, the mythic logic was carried through to other characters of the poem as well by later generations. This, as Mangels points out, is something that Dumézil and others actually do themselves in order to fill in the blanks, as it were, of the mythic structures they propose as determinative for the epic's meaning:

> Following the work of Wikander and Dumézil, the structural-mythic analysis does not see in the apotheosis of the heroes a secondary mythologization of the epic; the divine ancestry of the heroes should rather be defined with respect to Indo-European social functions which become definitive for the plot in the epic ... In order to complete the functional character of the apotheosis, the structural-mythic analysis then undertakes its own identifications of heroes with gods who, because they are not mentioned in the text, can purportedly be established [as the counterparts of epic characters]. And so the Vedic god Prajāpati (Brahmā) is assigned to Vyāsa, who in the *aṁśāvataraṇa*, the portion-descent of the heroes, (MBh I.61), has no divine ancestry;[210] similarly the father of the heroes Pāṇḍu, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra as well, are assigned to Varuṇa, while Yudhiṣṭhira is assigned to both Mitra and

Couture, "From Viṣṇu's Deeds to Viṣṇu's Play, or Observations on the Word Avatāra as a Designation for the Manifestations of Viṣṇu." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29, no.3 (2001): 318), the descent of the gods onto the earth and their birth in human families are simply two steps of one process, each stage of which employs language appropriate to the respective activities of descent and birth. The terms √*jan* and √*bhū* are quite naturally the verbs used to describe the moment of the birth, while the preceding moment of descent is described with *avataraṇa*.

[209] Annette Mangels, *Zur Erzähltechnik im Mahābhārata* (Hamburg: Kovač, 1994), 54-59.

[210] Here Mangels cites Sullivan, *Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa and the Mahābhārata.*

Yama.[211] And so the mythological interpretors of the text themselves subsequently carry out precisely that which they deny, namely the secondary mythologization of the epic. In this manner they conspicuously demonstrate how the epic may have materialized ... [T]he proponents of the structural-mythic analysis resort to the pantheon of Indian gods in order to feed their interpretation of the epic as eschatological myth. They thus permit themselves such freedoms to go beyond the "text as it stands"[212] as much as the operations of the analytic scholarship which they criticize.

What Mangels suggests here is a process whereby mythic identities generate further identifications. If we were to accept this understanding of how the characters' complex identities came about, we would perhaps find an explanation for why the divine ancestry of certain heroes, such as the five Pāṇḍava brothers and Draupadī, are so thoroughly integrated into the entire work, while others forming part of the same list of identifications in the *Book of Partial Incarnations* seem to have so little significance.[213] Thus Mangels, moreso than van Buitenen or Hacker, postulates a gradual process of mythologization at work behind the divine ancestry of the epic's characters. While van Buitenen and Hacker seem to emphasize a single act of reworking, Mangels suggests that richer and richer levels of mythic meaning were assigned to the story by recipients of the text, who developed and extended the mythology already present in the text as received by them.

The foregoing hypotheses regarding the mythic ancestry of the epic characters all posit a development over time of simpler to more complex understandings of the *Mahābhārata*'s story and its heroes.[214] The hypothesis of

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[211] Here Mangels cites (for Pāṇḍu as Varuṇa identification): Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* vol.1, 156ff. and Dumézil, "La transpositions des dieux souverains mineurs en héros dans le *Mahābhārata*;" (for Dhrtarāṣṭra as Varuṇa identification) Johnson, "Varuṇa and Dhrtarāṣṭra;" and Dumézil, "La transpositions des dieux," 9; (for Yudhiṣṭhira as Mitra and Yama): Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* vol.1, 152.

[212] Mangels here cites Johnson, "Varuṇa and Dhrtarāṣṭra," 246, note 6.

[213] It could also contribute to our understanding as to why we find such a confounding richness of character in Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa: these two draw to themselves a surfeit of divine identities asserted throughout the poem: Arjuna is the son of the Vedic king of gods Indra; all five Pāṇḍavas are reincarnations of five former Indras, and so Arjuna is also a reborn former Indra (and not merely his son); the pair Arjuna-Kṛṣṇa is identified with the divine pair Nara-Nārāyaṇa; Kṛṣṇa is identified, independently, as Nārāyaṇa (while Arjuna's status as Nara is never independent, but always tied to Kṛṣṇa-as-Nārāyaṇa); Arjuna is also identified with Kṛṇṣa in the phrase "the two Kṛṣṇas;" the god Viṣṇu is understood in the *Mahābhārata* as a form of Nārāyaṇa, and so Kṛṣṇa is identified with Viṣṇu as well.

[214] As always, the *Rāmāyaṇa* offers many grounds for comparison with the *Mahābhārata*. What is perhaps the key issue of debate in *Rāmāyaṇa* studies, namely the divinity (and humanity) of Rāma, presents a similar problem to that of the *Mahābhārata*'s mythic backdrop. On the one hand is the hypothesis that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was initially a purely human-hero story, but later Rāma was divinized, being identified with Viṣṇu, and greater mythic and religious levels of meaning

mythologization is appealing insofar as it offers an explanation for the complex and occasionally problematic nature of the poem's principal characters. But it is important to remember that the Critical Edition text gives us the oldest available form of the epic based on extant manuscripts, and that no form of the poem anteceding this edition is available. It is not possible to retrieve any simpler rendering of the *Mahābhārata* story from the present form of the text, nor can we reconstruct the identities of the heroes by somehow subtracting the mythic elements from the epic. As we have the text now, the divine ancestry of the characters and mythic backdrop of the battle between *devas* and *asuras* are an integrated aspect of the story; even if it were possible to prove definitively that the *Mahābhārata* underwent a process of mythologization, we would still be left with a text wherein these changes are so much part of the story that we find questions raised — and answered — about who the heroes really are. I would argue that Janamejaya's question at 18.5 is symptomatic of a self-consciousness on the part of the epic authors to address an issue they felt needed clarifying, and that this in fact indicates the extent to which the multivalent nature of the poem's characters was part of the epic story for those composing the conclusion.

Hence, while I agree with van Buitenen, Hacker, Mangels and others that the grander mythic schemes underlying the story and its characters may be attributable to some form of mythologization or re-casting (whether over a shorter or longer period of time), this hypothesis can only explain the background of the epic's complex characters. And so Janamejaya's question, while it may hint at a complexity of the epic characters explicable by the hypothesis of mythologization, does nonetheless receive an answer from Vaiśaṁpāyana. The answer is, despite Nīlakaṇṭha's arguments to the contrary, that the divine identities of the characters is final and all of the heroes return to their *aṁśins* in the end. As such there can be little doubt that for the authors of the poem's ending, the map of mythic *aṁśa* identifications — identifications with Vedic *devas* and *asuras* — constitutes the ultimate frame of reference for understanding the heroes' identities.

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assigned to the poem in later reworkings and additions to the text, particularly in the first and last of its seven books. This position is articulated today particularly by John Brockington. See, for example, Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 460-472; John Brockington, *Righteous Rāma: The Evolution of an Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 13-15, and Robert P. Goldman in the introduction to his translation of Book 1 of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Robert P. Goldman, trans. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, ed. Robert P. Goldman, vol.1: The *Bālakāṇḍa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). The principal response to such claims, which challenges the motivations and hermeneutic value of this conception of the text, has come from Sheldon Pollock, particularly in the introduction to his translation of Book 3 of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Sheldon Pollock, trans. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, ed. Robert P. Goldman, vol.3: The *Araṇyakāṇḍa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), and Sheldon Pollock, "The Divine King in the Indian Epic." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no.3 (1984): 505-528.

One final observation below on the *aṁśa-aṁśin* framework will provide a unique perspective on this matter and suggest one of the ways in which the epic authors may have understood this mythic dimension of the story's narrative.

4.3.2. The *Mahābhārata* as "Play" of the Gods

Above we took note of Paul Hacker's observations on the vocabulary used to describe the descent of the gods in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivaṁśa*. André Couture has made an important contribution to this work and re-evaluated some of Hacker's claims presented in the "Zur Entwicklung" article.[215] The principal issue raised by Couture concerns an overtone to *ava* + √*tṛ* constructions which Hacker misses: "In theatrical language, the word *avataraṇa* (or the verb *avatṛ*) is a precise technical term used to describe that movement performed by actors who move from the stage wings onto the stage itself."[216]

Couture illustrates this theatrical sense of *avataraṇa* with two episodes from the *Mahābhārata* wherein the verb *ava* + √*tṛ* is used in connection with a *raṅga* or stage.[217] In so doing he demonstrates that the authors of these sections were familiar with this more technical, theatrical use of the term. The sense of this verb and the object *raṅga* or stage is that of someone stepping into a public space, an open stage or arena with an observing audience, despite the fact that the movement is horizontal and not actually one of descent. Elsewhere, the movement of soldiers onto Kurukṣetra itself is described with *ava* + √*tṛ* constructions, which "produces a very precise effect in the mind of the reader: it transforms the battlefield into a stage."[218]

If *avataraṇa* and similar *ava* + √*tṛ* derivatives appear in the *Mahābhārata* with this theatrical overtone of entry onto a stage,[219] we should consider the implications this may have for the myth of the *aṁśāvataraṇa* established at 1.58-61 and the accompanying mythic framework underlying the poem. If *avataraṇa* carries a sense of an actor appearing on a stage, the entire earth upon which the gods descend in portions (*aṁśāvataraṇa*), may itself be understood as a great stage. With this sense of *avataraṇa* in mind, Couture cites *Mahābhārata* 2.33.13-20 wherein Nārada calls to mind the divine ancestry of the Bhāratas and realizes the earth has become the stage upon which the descended gods will enact the battle: "Nārada ... understands that the earth has now become a gigantic stage. No *aṁśāvataraṇa* is possible without a *raṅgāvataraṇa*. The Kurukṣetra itself, the

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[215] Couture, "From Viṣṇu's Deeds to Viṣṇu's Play."

[216] Ibid, 319.

[217] Ibid, 320-321. Couture cites (Critical Edition) 1.124-125 and 1.174-185.

[218] Ibid, 321. Couture cites *Mahābhārata* 6.1.3; 12.48.2-3; 12.53.23; 15.30.16; 16.8.65.

[219] Here I would add: such appearances are not isolated in clumps but are found in Books 1, 6, 12, 15 and 16.

battlefield on which the war takes place, looks like a mythic *raṅgabhūmi* [theatrical stage] where Devas as well as Asuras come to fight."[220]

By redressing an aspect of *ava* + √*tṝ* constructions overlooked by Hacker, Couture provides us with an important clue for our broader concern with the *aṁsa-aṁśin* framework: the descent of the gods described at 1.58-61 may be read as an entry onto the stage of the earth for the purpose of removing her burden, and the events of the *Mahābhārata* thereby broadly defined as the "play" of the gods. If within the text of the *Mahābhārata* itself the theatrical sense of the verb *ava* + √*tṝ* with *raṅga* as its object is attested, as Couture shows, the mythic backdrop of the *Mahābhārata*'s events seem to take on a new dimension. A sense emerges whereby the gods play the roles of the characters whom they generate through the descent of their portions. Once the work of relieving the earth of her burden is done, the divine actors return to their natural states and the great play is concluded.[221]

Hence even if we accept the hypothesis of the mythologization of the text articulated above, the poem's backdrop of Vedic myth may yet be understood as a presentation of the celebrated story of the Kurukṣetra war in grand dramatic terms, wherein the great battle and all its prior and subsequent events are a massive production, an *ad hoc avataraṇa* of the gods, as it were, onto the stage of the earth. The *Mahābhārata* is this great drama, perhaps initially building from a simpler received story of the great Kurukṣetra war, but ultimately conceiving its characters as actors within a larger framework of cosmic proportions. In such a conception of the epic's events, elements such as *karma, saṁsāra* and potential past and future lives for the the heroes become prop elements and are ultimately subsidiary parts of a bigger production which ends when the *deva* and *asura* actors leave the stage upon which they had descended.

4.4. Conclusion

In section 4.2. above, we met Janamejaya inquiring about the ultimate fate of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters upon their death. Behind this question and answer exchange lies the issue of the complex identities of the poem's heroes who appear to be human agents operating within *saṁsāra* and subject to *karma*, as well as the offspring and partial incarnations of supernatural creatures. The fact that the authors of Book 18 put such a question in Janamejaya's mouth suggests that this issue was not a simple one even for them, and we have seen how much moreso this is the case for later tradition: Nīlakaṇtha feels this matter needs further clarification and he grapples with the question of the identities of the

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[220] Ibid, 321.

[221] I am indebted to Dr. Couture for pointing out that theatrical texts define *prakṛti* (which we will recall is the term used to refer to the state to which the characters return in 18.5) as 'character.'(personal communication, April 2006).

Mahābhārata's characters at length. After a close analysis of *Mahābhārata* 18.5 as found in the Vulgate, Critical and other editions, I decided to part ways with Nīlakaṇṭha who claimed that the heroes did not all return to the divinities of whom they were portions. On the contrary, everyone was reabsorbed into the parent-divinities after a brief stay in heaven.

But why should the *Mahābhārata* have so multivalent a conception of its heroes? Why does the mythic dimension of the poem represented by the divine ancestry of the characters underlie the plot of the epic story? Section 4.3.1. introduced a common scholarly response to this problem: the *Mahābhārata* as we have it today is the product of a reworking of an older story which assigned divine parentage to the characters who were initially conceived of in simpler terms. But while this hypothesis can give us a sense of how the mythic setting may have come about, the backdrop is nonetheless part and parcel of the epic as we have it today, and in fact makes up the final, definitive frame of reference for the heroes' identities. Finally, we saw in section 4.3.2. that a theatrical sense can be attributed to the mythic frame underlying the story, and consequently the entire narrative may be conceived as a play of the gods. Hence whatever changes the poem may have undergone prior to the normative redaction, we may identify in the mythic frame of *aṁśa-aṁśin* relationships an all-embracing rendering or representation of the events of the great Bhārata war as the deeds of *devas* and *asuras*, for whom the earth was a great stage. The authors of the *Mahābhārata*'s conclusion seem to have understood the epic's events in this way, for they make the return of each character to his or her divine form the final scene of the narrative.

In this analysis of the characters' post-death fates, we have seen once again that the *Mahābhārata*, although not a Vedic text, is yet a work permeated and constructed against a paradigm of Vedic myth. The old trope of the *devas* battling the *asuras*, so central to the myths of the *Brāhmaṇas*, underlies the action of the entire poem and generates a map of identifications between the epic characters and Vedic divinities. This casting is presented in detail in the *Book of Partial Incarnations* in the *Ādiparvan*, and, at least as far as the principal characters are concerned, carried through consistently across the entire poem, and reasserted definitively in Book 18. van Buitenen and Gonda's assertions that the Vedic mythology behind all of this is "decaying," merely heraldic, or "an almost forgotten and no longer actual mythologeme" is contestable, but more importantly may divert our attention away from the actual content of the text in its present form. That the ritual and mythic universe of the Veda is a key frame of reference for this form of the text has already been demonstrated in chapters 2 and 3, and the present matter of the *Mahābhārata*'s underlying mythic backdrop illustrates this as well on an even larger scale. Hence while we have on the one hand the possibility that the set of Vedic identifications may represent a reworking of the text, and on the other the fact, furnished by hindsight, that the theistic traditions of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism came to dominate over the Vedic pantheon and ritual world, the form of the text which we must address lies somewhere between these two points. It would therefore not seem wise either to attempt to retrieve some

"pre-mythologized" form of the text, nor to downplay its Vedic mythological dimension on the basis of (again, what we know by hindsight to be) later theistic developments by no means fully developed in the poem.

The matter of *karma* in Book 18 provides a good index to the Vedic quality of the poem's concluding scene. We have noted above that Nīlakaṇṭha does not quite accept the resolution of each character to his or her *aṁśin* without qualification; for him, the post-death scenario of 18.5 must be made to accomodate a fairly sophisticated conception of *karma*. As we saw, this rather goes against the grain of the *mūla* or basic text upon which he composes his commentary. Janamejaya's question in the *mūla* text does show us that the *Mahābhārata*'s universe is complex, and that the matter of the characters' identities is not a simple one. Nīlakaṇṭha's universe, however, is far more complex than the *Mahābhārata*'s, at least in terms of the mechanics of *karma*. The commentator thus seems to overlook the fact that the matter is resolved definitively by Vaiśaṁpāyana who outlines the reabsorption of each hero to his or her parent-divinity while making no reference to any rebirth on earth or continued saṁsāric existence for any character. In a sense this may be understood as an assertion, on the part of the author or authors of Book 18, of a distinctly Vedic concept of afterlife which trumps or ultimately dominates over the other possibilities that Janamejaya's question suggests. As a philosopher, Nīlakaṇṭha investigates what he feels these possibilities are, but I would argue that the only thing that truly matters in the *Mahābhārata*'s concluding scene is the reassertion and closure of the framework of mythic identities — a framework that is distinctly Vedic in character.

Behind our treatment of the poem's mythic backdrop lies an important issue in *Mahābhārata* scholarship as yet not fully engaged, namely the extensive work of Georges Dumézil and the considerable response it has generated in epic studies. I have endeavoured to limit discussion of this matter above, as it would surely take us far beyond the immediate concerns of this dissertation, but a final word on this subject should be offered by way of concluding this chapter. For Dumézil, the entire framework of Vedic myth under discussion here constitutes the first and last standard of meaning for the *Mahābhārata*, insofar as the poem's entire design derives, according to him, from the transposition of Vedic (that is, Indo-European) myth to the human plane of the epic.[222] The divine parentage and ancestry of the poem's characters provide the key to reading the entire *Mahābhārata*, which recasts Vedic structures, relationships and mythology in both its broad theme and particular episodes.

To a considerable extent I would agree with Dumézil, particularly insofar as he insists on recognizing the structures and themes as they occur in the present form of the text rather than try to dig past them for some other, older kernel of the story. However I am not convinced that the map of identities between the human actors of the poem and their respective Vedic divinities constitutes the original

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[222] See above, p.19.

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plan of design and *raison d'être* for the entire poem. The multivalent nature and complex identities of the epic's characters would seem to belie a logic of one-to-one correspondences between the identities and deeds of the heroes and those of the Vedic gods. The *Mahābhārata* is much more than the story of a battle between *devas* and *asuras*, Arjuna is much more than the son of Indra, and Kṛṣṇa is certainly much more than a transposition of Viṣṇu as known in Vedic literature.[223]

I have suggested above that the author of Book 18 seems to be aware of this richness, as Janamejaya's question appears to betray the fact that the characters were not simply understood to be transposed Vedic divinities. It seems the matter is not clear in Janamejaya's mind, since he is not sure what will become of the heroes after they die. The fact that the Vedic identities of the characters is ultimately reasserted in Book 18 certainly says a lot about the present form of the text, but it should not compel us to adopt Dumézil's comprehensive commitment to the structures and themes of Vedic myth as the driving logic of its composition. Rather I have simply tried to show, as in chapters 2 and 3, that the Vedic quality of the final scene of the poem is noteworthy precisely because the *Mahābhārata* is not a Vedic text. In a sense I have tried to articulate a position somewhere between Dumézil and Nīlakaṇṭha: Dumézil is right to stress the Vedic identities of the characters, for this aspect of the characters is in the end final or ultimate.[224] Yet there is much in the poem that cannot be explained by the model of the transposition of Vedic myth onto the epic plane. Nīlakaṇṭha, meanwhile, is right to assume that the notions of *saṃsāra* and future rebirth on earth should come into play when the heroes die, since such notions are well-attested in the poem. But his philosophical treatment of the matter extends far beyond the *Mahābhārata*'s concepts of *karma* and rebirth, and as such misrepresents what is being asserted in 18.5: whatever else these characters might be, in the end they returned whence they came, and this entails the closure of a distinctly Vedic map of character identities. Once again, I emphasize here that a sensitivity to the structuring effect of Vedic ritual and myth upon the narrative of the poem is necessary if we wish to understand why it ends the way it does. As in chapters 2 and 3, this requires looking beyond the surface — beyond *prima facie* assumptions about *karma, saṃsāra* and rebirth such as are made by Nīlakaṇṭha, to the Vedic elements which govern the content and configuration of the *Mahābhārata*'s ending.

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[223] Dumézil himself concedes this, admitting that Kṛṣṇa "overflows" the Vedic Viṣṇu, but insists nonetheless that the Vedic identity of Kṛṣṇa is "clear" (Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* vol.1, 210).

[224] Curiously, Dumézil himself does not understand all the characters to be reabsorbed back into their *aṃśins* in the end, but rather claims that "some, gods or portions of gods incarnated, resumed their place; others, the sons of gods, were seated next to their fathers." (Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* vol.1, 42). As I have argued above, this distinction between proximity and complete reabsorption applies only for the initial scene of heaven; the complete reabsorption of all characters to their *aṃśins* is then described at 18.5.8-24.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has focused on the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata*, and as I present the conclusion to this dissertation, it might be appropriate to reflect on why endings are important, particularly in the case of so large a work as the *Mahābhārata*. The matter is not at all a simple one, but must be addressed as we review the arguments presented above. Here I think the example of the novel or work of fiction can be helpful as a foil against which we can measure the value that the *Mahābhārata's* ending may offer us for an understanding of the entire poem.

When we read novels or works of fiction, there is often an expectation that the author's final goals — final in both sequence and priority — are revealed in the way he or she constructs the story's conclusion. The logic of traditional fictional narratives reserves a privileged status for endings, for we cannot truly know a story until we know its conclusion; until we do we tend to reserve our judgment of the author's purposes. To be sure, the *Mahābhārata* is not a novel or work of fiction, but as we noted in section 1.2.4, even the 9th century theoretician Ānandavardhana understood the entire poem on the basis of its conclusion, claiming in his *Dhvanyāloka* that because of the sad way the *Mahābhārata* ends, the predominant poetic flavour or *rasa* of the entire poem is of *śānta* or peace.[225]

I would not go so far as to locate the "meaning of the *Mahābhārata*" in the poem's ending, or premise the value of Books 17 and 18 upon a notion of a large-scale literary design culminating in the work's conclusion, as we might do for a novel or work of fiction. But in these two short but eventful books, the poet or poets work out the final details of an enormous narrative that has gone on for some 70,000 verses. What did the poet or poets wish to impart to the hearers or readers of the story in these last scenes? What elements of the narrative are resolved?[226] It seems likely to me that the narrative issues wound up here were of special importance to the author, and that the events constituting the final scenes might indicate which themes, characters and elements of the story the poet felt were most important and most deserving of the audience's attention.

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[225] See above, pages 46-47.

[226] Perhaps the best example of an issue seen to be unresolved in the *Mahābhārata* and in need of further elaboration is the person of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa. Immediately following the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata*, we have the *Harivaṁśa* or "*Lineage of the Lord [Kṛṣṇa]*" which opens with the brahmin Śaunaka pressing Ugraśravas to tell him about Kṛṣṇa's tribes, the Andhakas and Vṛṣṇis. Despite everything he has heard about the Kurus (in the foregoing recitation of the *Mahābhārata*), he has not heard about the origins of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas (*tatra janma kurūṇāṁ vai tvayoktaṁ lomaharsaṇe | na tu vṛṣṇyandhakānāṁ vai tad bhavān prabravītu me*, Critical Edition *Harivaṁśa* 1.5). This request, as Freda Matchett points out, is really a call to fill in the complete life story of Kṛṣṇa, which is piecemeal at best in the *Mahābhārata*, but layed out systematically as a biography in the *Harivaṁśa*. The *Harivaṁśa's raison d'être*, then, is quite self-consciously to supply all the details about Kṛṣṇa that the *Mahābhārata* does not provide (Matchett, "The *Harivaṁśa*: Supplement to the *Mahābhārata* and Independent Text," 139-150).

Consequently, I feel we can assume the final books might be of special value for our understanding of the text as a whole.

But let us return to the analogy of the novel: if after enjoying a novel we discover that its ending was not that of the original author, but appended later on by another hand, our understanding of the work must inevitably be shaken. Where Ānandavardhana did not question the authorship of the poem by Vyāsa, the contemporary scholar may feel compelled to do so, and thus hesitate to assume without question the integral relationship of the epic's ending to the entire work. If so, the value we assign to the final books for understanding the text on a larger scale would certainly be affected.

The purpose of chapter 1, then, was to dispel any suspicion that the *Mahābhārata*'s final books might have been late additions to a shorter, pre-existing form of the text having some other ending. I reviewed some of the reasons why one might suspect this was the case, but was not convinced by any of them, and asserted instead that the Critical Edition's *parvans* 17 and 18 represent the only ending to the *Mahābhārata* that Sanskrit traditions of the text appear to have ever known. While the normative redaction may not have been the product of a short-term literary creation from scratch, it does present the story of the great Bhārata war in a comprehensively structured framework; the Pāṇḍavas' *mahāprasthāna* and *svargārohaṇa* were an integrated part of this text. I would argue that this allows the reader of the *Mahābhārata* to see the poem's ending in a way that is analogous to a traditional novel or work of fiction, and to assume, like Ānandavardhana, that the poem's conclusion may grant us a degree of insight on the entire work. The authors of Books 17 and 18 were surely authors of other portions of the *Mahābhārata* as well, and so if we understand why they terminated this huge work as they did, this would surely enrich our understanding of the *Mahābhārata*. The account of the deaths and afterlife fates of the epic's central heroes make up the two principal narrative elements of the books in question. I therefore took up the matter of how the Pāṇḍavas die, and the meaning of the subsequent scene in heaven as the two areas of concern for the dissertation.

Thus far I have reviewed why I took up Books 17 and 18 as especially worthy of study, and which elements in particular of these books I felt called for close analysis. The question of how best to approach this material then presented itself. There are multiple ways in which we can conceive the *Mahābhārata*, and accordingly multiple hermeneutic frameworks: the *Mahābhārata* is a war epic centering on the *kṣatriya* or warrior class; it is a *dharmaśāstra* imparting worldly wisdom; it is a seminal text of Vaiṣṇavism prefiguring the *bhakti* traditions of the *Purāṇas*. But one approach to the *Mahābhārata* in particular that has yielded a great deal to our understanding of the poem is to trace the continuities between the narrative of the epic and the ritual and mythic culture of the Veda. Indeed, as a *smṛti* or remembered work, the *Mahābhārata* is distinguished from the *śruti* or Veda, and even features criticisms of the Vedas on occasion; as such we may initially tend to disconnect the *Mahābhārata* from the Veda. But if we do so, we miss a vital dimension to the poem. Some of the key developments in epic studies

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have thus come from scholars tracing the themes of Vedic ritual and myth in the *Mahābhārata*, and it has now been demonstrated that to understand much of the *Mahābhārata*, we must read it against a background of Vedic themes and structures. For all that this approach to the text has brought us, however, it has never been applied in any systematic way to the poem's conclusion. This, then, is the hermeneutical tool I have employed throughout for our analysis of Books 17 and 18.

An element of the *Mahābhārata*'s general structure gave us a clue where to begin this Vedic reading of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths: the *Mahābhārata*'s outer narrative frames which establish the original context of the poem's recitation in the Vedic snake sacrifice or *sarpasattra* of King Janamejaya, and the *sattra* led by the brahmin Śaunaka at Naimiṣa forest. In chapter 2 I dug deeper into this *sattra* rite, in particular the *sārasvata yātsattra* or mobile sacrificial session along the Sarasvatī river. I argued that the authors of the poem's conclusion developed some of the imagery and motifs of Books 17 and 18 according to the structures and elements of this Vedic rite. Although the authors certainly deploy other ritual elements as well, such as the *mahāprasthāna* or self-imposed death by walking to the point of fatal exhaustion, reading the Pāṇḍavas' deaths against the model of the *sārasvata yātsattra* provided much of the principal narrative events of Books 17 and 18 with a common backdrop or frame of reference: the solidarity of the Pāṇḍāvas and Draupadī under the lead of Yudhiṣṭhira evokes the ritually consolidated *yātsattrins*, accompanied by their wives, under the leadership of their *gṛhapati*; the Pāṇḍavas' goal is, as for one performing the *sārasvata yātsattra*, to walk northwards on foot to the gate of heaven high in the mountains; the exchange with Agni at the Lauhitya and return of the Gāṇḍīva bow to Varuṇa seem to recall the *yātsattrin*'s daily offering to Agni and particularly the offering to Apāṁ Napāt at the confluence of the Dṛṣadvatī and Sarasvatī. Perhaps most importantly, the actual deaths of each family member seems to confirm what is specified in ritual texts of the *yātsattra*: one dying on the way to the gate of heaven in the northern mountains nonetheless accomplishes the goal of heaven. The leader Yudhiṣṭhira, meanwhile, dies in the manner of the *yātsattrin* who has successfully reached the head-waters of the Sarasvatī: he drowns and rises instantly to heaven. Reading the epic's conclusion in this way led me to suggest that, as elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*,[227] a Vedic ritual may have colored and helped shape the poem's narrative events.

Chapter 3, still focused on the manner in which the heroes die, pursued the same issue further and asked: if the Pāṇḍavas' deaths reflects some of the mythology and ritual sequence of the *yātsattra*, why does Yudhiṣṭhira drown in the Gaṅgā and not the Sarasvatī? And why do they perform a circumambulation of the earth before walking North? I sought to answer both of these questions by examining the *Mahābhārata*'s construction of *pradakṣiṇyā tīrthayātrā* or circumambulatory pilgrimage and its relationship to the *sārasvata yātsattra*.

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[227] See section 2.1.

The development I proposed began with Baladeva's pilgrimage up the Sarasvatī river in Book 9, which I argued was based in part on the model of the *sārasvata yātsattra* and hence may represent an older conception or construction of *tīrthayātrā* in the epic. The key motif carried over from the Vedic *sattra* sacrifice was that of suicide by drowning in the Sarasvatī for the sake of immediate entry to heaven. I then argued that the concept of circumambulatory pilgrimage or visitation of the *tīrthas* in an East-South-West-North pattern represents a later conception of *tīrthayātrā* in the epic which also preserves this motif of heaven-winning suicide by drowning, but does so within a greatly broadened itinerary covering all of North-Central India. The Pāṇḍavas' pilgrimage tour in Book 3, which is a sun-wise tour of the fords concluded by an ascent up the heavenly Gandhamādana, thus carries with it some of the important motifs of the *sārasvata yātsattra*. The Pāṇḍavas re-enact this journey in Book 17, performing a *pradakṣiṇa* or circumambulation of the earth and ascending to heaven in the North. Yudhiṣṭhira's act of drowning in the Gaṅgā subsequent to the *pradakṣiṇa* reflects the family relationship between the *yātsattra* and the *tīrthayātrā*, and thus we find motifs and imagery of the one alongside motifs and imagery of the other: circumambulatory movement, ascent into the northern mountains in search of heaven, death *en route* which brings heaven all the same, and meritorious suicide by drowning. And so in chapters 2 and 3, I proposed that the Vedic rite of the *yātsattra* can help us understand the simultaneous presence of these elements, for this ritual helps to shape the narrative content of the conclusion, and in a different sense underlies the rite of circumambulatory pilgrimage which the Pāṇḍavas undertake in Book 17. Hence the Vedic ritual frame of reference is key if we wish to understand why the Pāṇḍavas' deaths is constructed as it is.

From an emphasis on Vedic ritual I then turned in chapter 4 to Vedic myth in examining what happens to the characters once they arrived in heaven. The principal issues here were the complex identities of the *Mahābhārata*'s heroes and the mythic backdrop which underlies the poem's narrative. I argued that Janamejaya's question as to what really happened to the heroes after they died reflects an awareness of these complex identities on the part of the author. After mulling over the problematic textual issue of Vaiśaṁpāyana's reply with the help of the 17th century commentator Nīlakaṇṭha, I argued that all of the characters were reabsorbed into their respective *aṁśins* or parent-divinities.

Lying behind the nature of the characters as *aṁśas* or partial embodiments of Vedic divinities is the broader Vedic myth of the *devas* battling the *asuras*, against which the entire plot of the *Mahābhārata* is set. I argued that the multivalent conception of the heroes, who are by no means simple transpositions of their Vedic counterparts, may be explained by the hypothesis that characters initially conceived in simpler terms came to be assigned richer mythic identities in the course of the text's development. Ultimately, however, the Vedic myth of the *devas* battling the *asuras* makes up the final, definitive frame of reference for the characters' identities in the Critical Edition of the text. Following Couture, I

suggested that a theatrical sense can even be attributed to this mythic frame, whereby the entire narrative becomes a play of the gods, acting out the great battle on the "stage" of the earth. Hence in examining the post-death fates of the epic heroes, I sought once again to demonstrate that, although it is not a Vedic text, the *Mahābhārata* is nonetheless a work constructed in a very important way against the paradigm of Vedic myth. I have argued, in fact, that we cannot truly understand what is happening in the poem's final scenes if we do not adopt this approach to the narrative.

I would now like to step back and make some observations on the kind of patterning we have seen at work here, and subsequently broach some broader theoretical issues concerning the poet or poets behind all of this literary activity. Our analysis of the Veda's roles in the *Mahābhārata* has shown us a certain heterogeneity in the ways in which Vedic myth and ritual impact the text. First, we noted that the entire poem is overarched by two narrative frames which situate the poem's recitation at Vedic *sattra* ceremonies. This gives us one image of the importance of the Veda for the text of the *Mahābhārata* as we have it today: it draws a clear and immediate connection between the first public presentations of the poem and the performance of Vedic ritual. Here we could say that Vedic ritual structure impacts the *Mahābhārata*'s entire narrative structure.

In chapter 2, we focused on the *sattra* rite as well, in particular the *yātsattra*, but there saw Vedic ritual functioning in quite a different way. I argued that the *yātsattra* helped to colour and shape the events of Books 17 and 18, which otherwise do not make any direct reference to the ritual. The Pāṇḍavas do not explicitly perform the Vedic *sattra*, but rather the ritual is evoked behind the narrative events. I suggested that this exemplifies the same phenomenon of the ritual structuring of narrative observed by van Buitenen and others. This would seem to be a rather different kind of role for Vedic ritual to play than the explicit framing of the *Mahābhārata*'s recitation in *sattra* ceremonies. Here we could say that Vedic ritual structure impacts the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative.

When pursuing the issue of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths further in chapter 3, we observed that a Vedic ritual — once again the *yātsattra* — acted as a model for understanding the later, non-Vedic rite of *tīrthayātrā*. I argued that Baladeva's pilgrimage was a kind of appropriation, by means of the Vedic ritual model of the *sārasvata yātsattra*, of the newer activity of sequentially visiting the sacred fording places, which no doubt had developed and become popular on the ground independently of the *Mahābhārata*. Thus the role of Vedic ritual suggested here is one of framing and accomodating a newer religious paradigm by means of a pre-existing Vedic one. I then argued that the expanded clockwise *tīrthayātrā* represented a later conception of the rite which in part drew upon the earlier account of Baladeva's tour. But even in the case of this developed construction, the model of Vedic ritual persists insofar as the new form of religious undertaking is measured favorably against the old Vedic rites: pilgrimage brings greater merit to more people than even the grandest old Vedic sacrifices. Here again, Vedic ritual persists as a standard of reference, but in a way that differs appreciably from

those noted before. Here we could say that Vedic ritual impacts non-Vedic ritual, indeed in two different ways: by appropriating and by contrasting.

Finally, chapter 4 showed us how central Vedic myth is for the entire poem: the events of the great war are understood as the acting out on earth of the age-old battle between *devas* and *asuras*, so often recounted in the *Brāhmaṇas*. The casting of the *Mahābhārata*'s events against this backdrop of Vedic myth shows us yet another way in which the world of the Veda has shaped the epic: the earthly events of the story are identified with a well-established trope of Vedic literature, and the human actors within it are identified with the Vedic divinities of that literature. Once again, this shows us a different kind of role played by the Veda in the *Mahābhārata*. Here we could say that Vedic narrative impacts the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative.

Clearly, then, the ways in which the Veda functions within the *Mahābhārata* are diverse. To be sure, the mythic and ritual world of the Veda is never far from the surface of the poem's events, but this ever-present standard is not uniform in the way it shapes the poem. It is sometimes explicit, as in the case of the narrative frames, the gauging of the *tīrthayātrā*'s merits, and the casting of the epic plot and characters against a Vedic myth, and sometimes implicit, as in the case of the Rājasūya's structuring of the events of the *Sabhāparvan*, the comparable structuring of the events of Books 17 and 18 according to the *yātsattra*, or the reception into the *Mahābhārata* text of the *tīrthayātrā* by constructing it against the model of the *sārasvata yātsattra*. However manifold the Veda's roles might be within the epic, such patterns nonetheless direct us back again to the hypothesis of brahminical authorship — to the claim that the *Mahābhārata* has reached its present form in great part through the literary activity of brahmins committed to the ultimacy of the Veda and its obligatory ritual undertakings. Until now I have not developed any hypothesis concerning these authors, but rather maintained a focus on the Vedic motifs and ritual structures themselves. Throughout my goal has been to show that such elements were an important frame of reference for the authors of the poem's conclusion, and that in order to understand why the *Mahābhārata* ends the way it does, we must understand this frame of reference.

Consequently, the discussion thus far has sought answers to a first order level of questioning: Why do the Pāṇḍavas die in the way that they do? Why do they circumambulate the earth in Book 17? Why are the *Mahābhārata*'s characters identified with Vedic divinities? All of the answers I have offered to such questions refer back to Vedic elements and structures impacting the narrative content. But a second order of questioning now presents itself: Why does Vedic myth and ritual affect the text in this way? Who is responsible for this quality, and what motivated them to impress such elements upon the text? We have no direct means of identifying these authors, let alone any any access to their inner thoughts, and so replies to such questions as these are ultimately matters of pure speculation. Nonetheless, I will make a few final observations which I think may

help us to understand more about the authors of Books 17 and 18, and what might have motivated them to structure the scenes in the ways I have argued above.

If we turn to the Vedic literature itself, we may find something to help us answer these questions. Perhaps the most characteristic element of Vedic literature is the trope of *bandhu* ("connection" or "linkage"). Particularly in the literature of the *Brāhmaṇas*, identifications are continually made between components of the ritual apparatus — the materials and tools used in the rites, physical gestures, chants and meters of the liturgy — and the elements of the cosmos: the sun, the moon, the year, the earth. The efficacy of Vedic ritual lies in its power to access and manipulate these hidden linkages between micro- and macrocosm. As such, numerical and structural equivalence, analogy, homology, and secret identifications govern the logic of the ritual system developed in the *Brāhmaṇas* and carried through to its post-Vedic culmination in the ritual literature of the *Śrauta Sūtras* and philosophical system of the Pūrva Mīmāṁsā. Phrases such as "this, indeed is that," or "he who knows that X is indeed Y, truly knows" are too numerous to be counted in the literature of the *Brāhmaṇas*.[228] Indeed, the elaborate science of Vedic ritual is built upon the mastery of such equivalences.

Making connections is therefore not only a tendency in Vedic ritual, it is an imperative, for whoever does not know the hidden *bandhu* will fail in his ritual endeavor, and the "sacrifice will flee from him." And so if we accept that the *Mahābhārata* has been shaped in important ways by brahminical concerns, it is only natural that we should find a reflection of this kind of linking in the epic as well. If one were to ask, then, why the authors imposed such Vedic structures on the text, I might offer: the formula "this is that" was central to the poets' way of thinking and constituted the driving logic of their entire ritual culture. The *bandhu*, then, links the epic events with the rituals and myths of the Veda so familiar to the authors.

If these poets imposed the Vedic rite of the *yātsattra* upon the account of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths, or identified the *mahāprasthāna* with the *yātsattra* outright, this might reflect the kind of linking we see in the *Brāhmaṇas*. In their hands, the account of the Pāṇḍavas' deaths becomes an enactment of a ritual familiar to them. What is here, that is to say, the known and familiar structures and elements of the Vedic *sattra*, — is there, that is to say within the narrative content of the Pāṇḍavas' *mahāprasthāna*. The example of Baladeva's *tīrthayātrā* may provide a better example of this: his *tīrthayātrā* — a non-Vedic form of religious activity — is constructed as a *sārasvata yātsattra*. But perhaps more than any other element discussed above, the matter of the *Mahābhārata*'s mythic framework might be explained as a function of the brahminical impulse to draw *bandhus*. The great

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[228] Brian K. Smith refers to this phenomenon as "[t]he distinctly Vedic proclivity for making connections." Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 34. For an excellent review of scholarly treatments of this aspect of Vedic religion, see 30-49 of the same volume.

conflict of the Bhāratas was, in fact, a battle of *devas* and *asuras*. The cataclysmic event of the great war, which took place here on earth, was a mythic event; the human actors were in reality divinities, and the conflict yet another instance of the perpetual struggle between the *devas* and *asuras*. Indeed, as I argued in section 4.3.2, such "this is that" representation of the *Mahābhārata*'s events may even have a theatrical or dramatic sense behind it as well. The logic of this is carried through to each major character, and the map of identifications between each epic personality and Vedic divinity is created.

I offer all of this as just one possible reason why the authors of Books 17 and 18 may have shaped the conclusion as they did. Such a hypothesis must remain purely speculative, but it does seem reasonable that the *Mahābhārata* might, as a text significantly shaped by Vedic culture, reflect some of the theology of ritual connections so central to Vedic thinking. If nothing else, it should encourage the epic scholar to seek out the links between the Veda and the *Mahābhārata* and to "know the *bandhu*" between the two. I hope that I have shown in this dissertation that much of the meaning of the *Mahābhārata*'s ending will flee from one who does not know this connection.

<u>Appendix 1:</u>
<u>Translation of the Critical Edition *Mahābhārata* Books 17 and 18</u>

<u>17.1</u>

Janamejaya said:

1. Having heard thusly [about the] battle of the clubs among the Vṛṣṇi and the Andhaka clans, what did the Pāṇḍavas do, when Kṛṣṇa [died and] went up to heaven?

Vaiśaṁpāyana said:

2. Indeed, having heard [about] the great slaughter of the Vṛṣṇis, setting his mind on departure (*prasthāna*), the Kuru King said this [speech] to Arjuna:

3. "Time surely cooks all creatures, O clever one! I set my mind on the renunciation of action; you should see this as well."

4. Addressed thusly, the mighty son of Kuntī [Arjuna], saying "Time, time!" attended to that speech of his elder brother.

5. Having attended to the view of Arjuna, Bhīmasena and likewise the twins understood that speech which was uttered by Savyasācin [Arjuna].

6. Then Yudhiṣṭhira, setting out, sent for Yuyutsu [and] bestowed the entire kingdom upon that son of the merchant woman with a desire for [the preservation of] *dharma*.

7. Having consecrated that King Parikṣit in independent soverignty, the distressed King [Yudhiṣṭhira], first born of the Pāṇḍavas, spoke to Subhadrā:

8/9. "This grandson of yours will become King of the Kurus, and Vajra, last of the Yadus verily is [also] made King: Parikṣit in Hāstinapura and [Vajra] of the Yadus in Indraprastha; King Vajra is to be protected by you; do not direct your mind to *adharma*!"

10/11. Having said this, that vigilant, righteous-souled Dharma King, accompanied by the mothers of wise Vasudeva, of [his] old uncle, and likewise of Rāma and the others, having offered water [to the *pitṛs*] for the sake of *śrāddhas* for all of them, then carried out [the *śrāddhas*] in accordance with the ritual injunctions.

12. [He] gave jewels, garments, villages, horses and chariots too, women, [and] cows by the hundeds of thousands to brahmins.

13. Having honored Kṛpa [as] guru who was esteemed and being asked for [by the populace], that best of the Bhāratas handed Parikṣit over to him [as] a student.

14. Then, having assembled all of the subjects [of the realm], Yudhiṣṭhira the Sage King then declared his intention in its entirety.

15. The sorrowful people of the town and country, having heard his speech, greatly disapproved of that speech.

16. "[This] is not to be done thusly!" they then said to the King, and the King, knower of the Law of the course of time, did not [depart just yet].

17. [But] then the righteous-souled one, having asked leave of the town and country populace, made up his mind to go. Then his brothers [did so too].

18. Then that King Yudhiṣṭhira, descendent of the Kurus, son of Dharma, having cast away the ornaments from [his] body, put on [garments made of] bark.

19. And [then] Bhīma and Arjuna, the twins, and beautiful Draupadī likewise all put on [garments made of] bark, O King.

20. Having arranged for the performance of a final renunciatory rite according to the ritual injunctions, [and] having cast [their sacrificial] fires together into the water, all those bulls of men went forth.

21. Then all the women began to cry, having seen those bulls of men set out [along with] Draupadī in sixth place, as when they were won at dice.

22. [But] considering the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis, and having understood Yudhiṣṭhira's opinion [regarding time], happiness arose in all of them with respect to [their] going forth.

23. [There were] the five brothers and Kṛṣṇā [Draupadī] the sixth, and also a dog as the seventh [of the group]; [but] the king went out from Hāstinapura, with himself in seventh place, followed [at a] distance by all those of the city and likewise by all those of the harem.

24. No one was able to say to him: "Stop!" [and] so all the people of the city desisted [from following them].

25/26. And then Kṛpa and the rest surrounded Yuyutsu; the snake-daughter Ulūpī entered the Gaṅgā river, O Kuru, and Citrāṅgadā went towards the city of Maṇipūra; the other remaining mothers surrounded Parikṣit.

27. The great-souled Pāṇḍavas and beautiful Draupadī who had [all] undertaken a fast went forth facing East, O descendent of the Kurus.

28. Enjoined to *yoga*, those great-souled ones, relying on the *dharma* of renunciation, approached many countries, rivers and likewise mountains.

29. Yudhiṣṭhira went first, then Bhīma immediately after him, and then [followed] Arjuna [after Bhīma], and the twins in succession.

30. Behind [these five] went fine-hipped, dark, lotus-eyed Draupadī, most beautiful of women, O best of the Bhāratas.

31. And even one dog followed the Pāṇḍavas [who had] set forth into the forest; gradually those heroes approached the Lauhitya river.

32. On account of greed for [their embedded] jewels, Dhanaṁjaya [Arjuna] had not left behind his divine Gāṇḍīva bow and two inexhaustible quivers, O great king.

33. The Pāṇḍavas saw Agni there, visibly in the form of a man, blocking their path, standing firm as a mountain in front of them.

34. The seven-rayed god [Agni] said this to the Pāṇḍavas: "Hail, hail heroic sons of Pāṇḍu, know me [as] Pāvaka.

35. O great-armed Yudhiṣṭhira, foe-destroying Bhīmasena, Arjuna and heroic sons of the Aśvins, heed my speech!

36. I am Agni, O thou best of the Kurus; by me was Khāṇḍava [forest] burned through [the agency of] Arjuna and likewise through Nārāyaṇa [Kṛṣṇa].

37. This brother of yours Phalguna [Arjuna] may go to the forest [only after] having given up the divine weapon Gāṇḍīva; there is no purpose for this [weapon any longer].

38. That jewel-discus which was fixed in great-souled Kṛṣṇa['s hand] [is now] gone, [but] will go in time [back] into his hand.

39. [Likewise] this foremost of bows, the Gāṇḍīva, previously received from Varuṇa by me for the sake of the descendents of Pṛthā, must [now] be given [back] to Varuṇa."

40. Then all the brothers entreated Dhanaṁjaya [to do as Agni said, and] he cast it into the water and likewise his two inexhaustible quivers.

41. Then Agni vanished right there, O foremost of the Bhāratas, [and] then those heroic Pāṇḍavas went facing South.

42. Then they went, O tiger of the Bharatas, to the South-West region by means of the northern bank of the Ocean of Salt Water (Lavaṇāmbhas).

43. Then, turned again to the western region, they saw Dvārakā flooded by the ocean.

44. Those best of the Bharatas, possessed of the *dharma* of *yoga*, having returned again to the North, went on, intending to circumambulate the earth.

17.2

Vaiśaṁpāyana said:

1. Then those self-controlled ones, joined to *yoga*, [who were] going towards the northern region, saw the great mountain Himavat.

2. And then those [Pāṇḍavas], going beyond even that [Himavat], saw a desert; [then they] perceived the great mountain Meru, the most prominent of [mountain] tops.

3. But among all those [six of them] possessed of the the *dharma* of *yoga* who were going quickly, Yājñasenī [Draupadī], falling away from *yoga*, fell to the ground.

4. But mighty Bhīmasena, having seen her fallen, spoke to the Dharma King [while] looking at Yājñasenī.

5. "No *adharma* whatsoever was done by [this] mother of kings, O slayer of foes; what then is the reason for this, O King, that Kṛṣṇā fell to the earth?"

Yudhiṣṭhira said:

6. "Her inclination particularly for Dhanaṁjaya [Arjuna] [was] great, [and] she now suffers the fruit of this [partiality], O foremost of men."

7. Having spoken thusly, [and] without looking [back] at her, the righteous-souled bull of men, son of Dharma, collecting his sharp mind, went [on walking].

8. Then wise Sahadeva fell to the ground, and again having seen him fallen too, Bhīma spoke to the King:

9. "This son of Mādravatī [Mādrī] who [was] not proud [and who] tended to all of us, why is [he now] fallen on the ground?"

Yudhiṣṭhira said:

10. "This one did not consider anyone [to be] his equal [in] wisdom; by this fault, therefore, is this one of royal birth fallen."

Vaiśaṁpāyana said:

11. Having said this [and] having left Sahadeva behind, Yudhiṣṭhira son of Kuntī, accompanied by [his] brothers and by the dog, went [forth] then.

12. Having seen the fallen Kṛṣṇā and Sahadeva son of Pāṇḍu [fallen], heroic Nakula, dear to his family, pained, fell.

13. When that heroic, good-looking Nakula fell, once again Bhīma said this to the king:

14. "This brother [of mine] Nakula, whose [very] soul is unblemished righteousness, who [was always] obedient to [our] speech [and] unequalled in beauty in the world, has fallen on the ground."

15. Thus addressed by Bhīmasena, righteous-souled Yudhiṣṭhira, foremost among the all-wise ones, answered Bhīma regarding Nakula:

16. "'There is no one equal to me in beauty'; 'I am superior to everyone' — [such was] his opinion [of himself], firm in his mind.

17. "From this [flaw] Nakula fell. Come [along], Wolf-belly! He must inevitably reach [suffer the consequences of] that which is destined for him, O hero."

18. But having seen those fallen ones, Śvetavāhana [Arjuna], son of Pāṇḍu, slayer of enemy heroes, tormented by suffering, fell next.

19. [And] when that invincible man-tiger, glorious as Indra, fell dying [to the ground], Bhīma spoke to the king:

20. "I remember no falsehood of this great-souled one in any matter at all; so then of what is this the bad consequence by which he is fallen on the ground?"

Yudhiṣṭhira said:

21. "Arjuna [had] said — 'I will burn up [all my] enemies in [only] one day' [but] this boaster, not doing so, then fell.

22. "This Phalguna [also] treated all [other] archers with contempt, and it ought to be done exactly in the manner it is spoken by one who is seeking prosperity."

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

23. Having said this the king set out [again]. Then Bhīma fell. [That] fallen Bhīma said to the Dharma King Yudhiṣṭhira:

24. "Alas! Alas, O king, look! I your beloved [brother] have fallen! What is the reason for this fall, tell me if you know!"

Yudhiṣṭhira said:

25. "You were excessive in eating and boasted strenuously without consideration for others, O son of Pṛthā; that is why you have fallen to the ground."

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

26. Having said this, that great-armed one went [forth] without looking [back] at him; the one dog [who] has been mentioned to you [i.e. to Janamejaya] repeatedly by me, followed [him].

17.3

Vaiśaṃpāyana said:

1. Then Indra, filling all of heaven and earth with noise, approached that son of Pṛthā in [his] chariot and said "Ascend!"

2. Having seen [his] fallen brothers, that Dharma King Yudhiṣthira, tormented by suffering said this [speech] to thousand-eyed [Indra]:

3. "[I wish] my fallen brothers could come along with me here; I do not desire to go to heaven without them, O Lord of *devas*.

4. "[And I also wish] this delicate mother of kings, deserving of happiness, could come along with us; please allow it, O destroyer of fortresses!"

Indra said:

5. "Do not lament, O bull of the Bharatas; you will see all [your] brothers [and] sons gone before [you] to the triple-heaven accompanied by Kṛṣṇā.

6. "They are gone [to heaven] having cast off the mortal body, O bull of the Bharatas, [but] there is no doubt you are one who goes to heaven with this [mortal] body."

Yudhiṣthira said:

7. "O Lord of past and future, this dog is ever-devoted to me. He would [like to] go along with me. My mind is set on mercy."

Indra said:

8. "O king, you are one who has today attained immortality, equality with me, all prosperity and great renown, and the pleasures of heaven; renounce [this] dog, it is not cruel in this case [to do so]."

Yudhiṣthira said:

9. "For such a dishonorable thing to be done by a nobleman is difficult, O thousand-eyed one; O Ārya, let there be on my part no partaking of this prosperity for the sake of which I would [have to] renounce a person devoted [to me]."

Indra said:
10. "There is no home in the world of heaven for dog-keepers; [since] the Krodhavaśas destroy the stored-up merit of [their] sacrifices; [so] then, reflecting on [this fact] let it be done, O Dharma King: renounce the dog, it is not cruel in this case [to do so]."

Yudhiṣthira said:

11. "Here on earth they say the abandonment of a devotee is an excessively great sin equivalent to the murder of a Brahmin; therefore, O great Indra, I will absolutely not abandon this one here for the sake of [my] happiness."

Indra said:

12. "The Krodhasvaśas destroy that rite given and offered publicly which is seen by a dog; therefore make this renunciation of the dog, you will acquire the world of the gods by renouncing the dog!

13. "Having abandoned your brothers and [your] cherished Kṛṣṇā as well, [this] world [of heaven] is acquired by your own action, O hero; how is it, then, that you, who have [already] performed complete renunciation, do not renounce this dog? You are deluded!"

Yudhiṣthira said:

14. "This is the way of the world: [Neither] friendship nor enmity between the dead and the living is possible (vidyate). These [brothers and Kṛṣṇā] cannot be returned to life by me, so there was [in fact] no abandonment of the living done [earlier by me] among those ones.

15. "The abandonment of one who has come for protection, the murder of a woman, the theft of the property of a Brahmin, [and causing] harm to a friend; the renunciation of a devoted one is exactly the same as these four [sins] in my opinion, O Śakra."

Vaiśampāyana said:

16. Having heard the speech of that Dharma King, the Lord in the form of Dharma, greatly pleased, spoke tender words mixed with praises to King Yudhiṣthira:

17. "You are noble, O kingly Lord, [marked] by the good conduct of your father, by wisdom, and by this compassion for all beings, O Bharata!

18/19." My son, formerly you were tested by me in Dvaitava [forest], where your brothers, eagerly intent upon the goal [of finding] water, were killed [and] where you, having dismissed [as your choice] both [your] brothers Bhīma and Arjuna, [and] desiring to obtain equality between the two mothers, want[ed] Nakula alive.

20. "The chariot of the deva [Indra] was renounced by you, [saying] 'This dog is devoted [to me];' therefore there is no equal to you in heaven, O prince.

21. "Since you have undying worlds with your own body, O Bharata, you are [one who has] obtained the unsurpassed divine path, O best of the Bharatas."

22/23. Then, having made the son of Pāṇḍu climb into the chariot, Dharma, Śakra [Indra], the *maruts*, the two Aśvins as well, *devas* and even the seers of the *devas* — all of those perfected ones, roaming at will, free from dust, pure and pure in word, thought and deed, went forth with their own chariots.

24. The king, descendent of the Kurus, having mounted into the chariot, quickly ascended upwards, covering heaven and earth with [his] splendour.

25. Then Nārada, abiding among the host of the gods, knower of all the worlds, boaster [and] practicer of great austerities, said this [speech] loudly then:

26/27. "Indeed, the Kuru king arrives having enveloped the fame even of all of the sage-kings who have arrived [here], having covered the worlds with [his] excellent splendour [and] superb conduct. We have not heard of anyone other than the Pāṇḍava [who has] attained [heaven] with his own [mortal] body."

28. The righteous-souled king, having heard the speech of Nārada, saluting the gods and his royal allies, spoke:

29. "I seek today to obtain only that abode of my brothers, whether auspicious or inauspicious; I long for no other worlds."

30. Having heard the speech of the king, [the] destroyer of fortresses [Indra], king of gods, replied to Yudhiṣṭhira [who was] full of compassion:

31. "Dwell in this place, won by auspicious acts, O Rājendra. Why do you still ponder [so much] on mortal affections even now?

32. "You [are one who] has reached this most extraordinary accomplishment, in a way no other man [has done] anywhere. Surely your brothers have not attained [this] place, O descendent of Kuru.

33." Even now a mortal disposition keeps hold of you, O prince. This is heaven! Look at the seers of the gods, the Siddhas and abodes of the triple heavens!"

34. But wise Yudhiṣṭhira again spoke eloquently to the Lord, ruler of the gods who had spoken thusly:

35/36. "I cannot endure to live without them, O crusher of the Daityas, I want to go where my brothers [and] my dear Draupadī, that tall, dark one, endowed with qualities of *sattva* and *buddhi*, most beautiful of women, have gone."

18.1

Janamejaya said:

1. Having attained the three-world heaven, what stations [of afterlife] did my ancestors, the sons of Pāṇḍu and the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, enjoy?

2. I wish to hear this, and I think you know everything, granted permission by Vyāsa, the great sage, performer of wondrous acts.

Vaiśaṁpāyana said:

3. Hear [now] what your ancestors, Yudhiṣṭhira and the others, did once they attained the three-world heaven:

4/5. The righteous King Yudhiṣṭhira, having reached the three-world heaven, saw Duryodhana endowed with prosperity, seated in a seat, shining like the sun, covered by the splendour of heroes [and] accompanied by the radiant gods and the virtuous Sādhyas of meritorious works.

6-9. Then Yudhiṣṭhira, seeing Duryodhana, [and] seeing [such] glory upon [him], became angry, [and] turned back suddenly, saying loudly [this speech] to them: "I do not desire these worlds accompanied by [this] greedy [and] stupid Duryodhana, for whose sake the entire earth and likewise [our] friends and relatives were violently destroyed by us in battle, [after we were] tormented in the forest [during the exile], [and for the sake of whom] our wife Draupadī, daughter of the Pāñcālas, doer of what is righteous, of faultless body, was tormented in the middle of the [dicing] hall in the presence of [our] guru.

10. "Farewell, O *devas*, it is not my desire to look upon Suyodhana. I want to go where my brothers [are]."

11. But Nārada, smiling a little, [saying] "No, no!" said to him: "This abode is in heaven, O King, and [here] hostility disappears.

12. "O long-armed Yudhiṣṭhira, do not speak thusly! Hear my speech regarding this prince Duryodhana:

13. "This King Duryodhana is honored by the thirty [*devas*] along with good [men who are] the most excellent of kings; these are dwellers in heaven!

14. "[This Duryodhana] by whom all of you [Pāṇḍavas who] are equal to the gods, were assembled in battle, has attained the path of the world of heroes, having sacrificed his own body in battle.

15. "This prince, who was fearless in great danger, obtained this abode through [observance of his] warrior's duty.

16. "My son, what was caused by the dicing [match] should not be thought about, [nor] should you ponder Draupadī's pain.

17. "And you should not bring to mind those other pains of you [and your brothers] caused by the dicing match, in the battles or anywhere else.

18. "Be united with King Duryodhana according to custom; this is heaven, there are no hostilities here, O Prince!"

19. But wise Yudhiṣṭhira the Kuru King, thusly addressed by Nārada, asked about his brothers [and] said [this speech]:

20-23a. "If these eternal worlds of the heroes belong to the sinful, *dharma-*ignorant Duryodhana, who injures friends and the earth, because of whom the earth with [her] horses, chariots and elephants was destroyed, and [because of whom] we, burned up with rage, desire revenge, then which worlds now belong to my brothers of great vows, who are great-souled heroes, true to their promises to the world and valiant speakers of the truth?

23b-25. "I want to see them, and great-souled Karṇa too, son of Kuntī [who] fought for truth, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Sātyaki [Yuyudhāna], Dhṛṣṭadyumna's sons, princes who met their death by weapons through [observance of their] warrior's duty — where are these princes, O Brahmin? I do not see them, Nārada, [nor] Virāṭa and Drupada or those ones having Dhṛṣṭaketu as their chief.

26. "I want to see Śikhaṇḍin of the Pāñcālas and the sons of Draupadī all together, and Abhimanyu [who is] difficult to attack, O Nārada."

18.2

Yudhiṣṭhira said:

1."O thou wise ones, I do not see here Rādhā's son [Karṇa] of unbounded energy, nor the two great-souled brothers Yudhāmanyu and Uttamaujas.

2/3. "[Those] great warriors who sacrificed [their] bodies into the fire of battle, [those] kings and princes who were slain in battle for my sake: where are all these great warriors, powerful as tigers? Was this world won by those foremost of men?

4. "If all these great warriors have reached these worlds, [then], O *devas*, find me [know me as one who is] accompanied by those great-souled ones.

5. "Has this undying, auspicious world not been attained by these princes? I will not dwell [here] without these kinsmen and brothers.

6. "Having heard the words of [our] mother [Kuntī] then during the offering to the Pitṛs: 'Water must be offered to Karṇa' — because of this I am burning.

7/8ab. "And I grieve over this again and again, O Gods, that the feet of this [Karṇa] of unbounded energy, resemble those of [my] mother [Kuntī]. Having seen that, I [did] not follow that Karṇa, destroyer of enemy armies.

8cd. "Even Indra could not [have] defeat[ed] us in battle [had we been] accompanied by Karṇa.

9. "I want to see that son of Sūrya, wherever he may dwell — he who, [formerly] unknown to me [as my elder brother], I had Arjuna slay.

10/11." I want to see fearful and powerful Bhīma, even dearer to me than my own life's breath, Arjuna [whose] appearance is like Indra, those two twins resembling Yama, and [I want to see] that righteously-acting daughter of the Pāñcālas [Draupadī]. I do not want to stay here. This is the truth I speak to you all.

12. "What's the use of heaven, deprived of my brothers, O best of the gods? Where they are, that is my heaven. This is not heaven, in my opinion."

The Gods said:

13. "If indeed [there is] a desire on your part [to go] there, [then] please go quickly, my son. We [will] do what is dear to you, by the command of the King of the Gods."

Vaiśampāyana said:

14. Having said this O destroyer of foes, the gods then instructed their envoy: "Show Yudhisthira [his] friends."

15. Then the king, son of Kuntī, and the envoy of the gods, went together to where those bulls of men [were], O tiger among kings.

16-21. The [envoy] went in front, the king in behind, on an inauspicious and difficult path frequented by criminals, frightful and covered in darkness, grassy with hair and Śaivala weeds, filled with the smells of sinners, and having a mire of blood and flesh, filled with bees and mosquitoes, biting crickets, surrounded on all sides by corpses here and there, bestrewn with hair and bone, crowded with worms and insects, [and] surrounded on all sides by a burning flame, assailed by iron-mouthed ravens and vultures, likewise by needle-mouthed ghosts, and surrounded by amputated hands, thighs and arms, [all] covered with blood and fat, and by cut off feet and torsos cast everywhere [piled up] resembling the peaks of the Vindhya mountains.

22. The righteous-souled king went into that impure [place which] caused the hair to stand on end, stinking with corpses, pondering a great deal amongst [the bodies].

23-25. And the son of Kuntī also saw a river, very difficult to cross, full of boiling water, and a forest [the trees of which had] swords for leaves, covered with sharpened razors, hot sand-gruel, and elsewhere iron rocks and small metal pots of oil boiling over on all sides; and saw a Kūtaśālmalika bush and a Tīksna-kantaka plant, painful to touch: [all] the tortures of hell for criminals.

26. Having beheld that stinking [place], he said to the envoy of the gods: "How much of such a path as this must we walk on!?

27. "And where are those brothers [of mine], you should tell this to me! What region of the gods is this, I want to know!"

28. That envoy of the gods, having heard that speech of the Dharma King, stopped [and] said: "Such a path is yours.

29. "I was told by the sky-dwelling *devas* that I should turn back if you got tired, O Indra of Kings — you should come [back] now."

30. Yudhisthira, disgusted, stupefied by the stench, his mind set on turning back, turned around, O Bhārata.

31. The righteous-souled one, turned back [and] full of pain and misery, heard there wretched cries of [people] speaking from all sides:

32. "Hail, hail, Son of Dharma, Sage King, descendent of the righteous, son of Pāṇḍu! Just stop for a moment, for the sake of our welfare!

33. "When you [who are] inviolable, approach, a pure breeze blows, followed by your scent, by which pleasure comes to us, O Dear One!

34. "O Prince, we will have pleasure for a long time, O bull among men, having seen you, O best of kings!

35. "Stay with [us], O great-armed one, for just a moment, O Bhārata, [for] while you are standing [here], O descendent of the Kurus, torment does not afflict us!"

36. Thusly did he hear manifold pitiful voices of those pain-afflicted speakers from everywhere in that region, O Prince.

37. Having heard that speech of theirs, Yudhiṣṭhira, taking pity on those miserable speakers, stopped and uttered "Oh agony!"

38. That son of Pāṇḍu did not recognize those voices of the exhausted and distressed [which were] heard [right] in front [of him] again and again.

39. Yudhiṣṭhira, son of Dharma, not recognizing those voices, said: "Who are you, why are you here?"

40/41. Then all of those ones, addressed thusly spoke out from all sides, O King: "I am Karṇa!", "I am Bhīmasena!", "I am Arjuna!", "I am Nakula, Sahadeva!", "I am Dhṛṣṭadyumna!" as well [was heard] "[I am] Draupadī!", "[We are the] sons of Draupadī!" — thusly did they cry out.

42. Then the king, having heard those voices in that region [of hell], O Prince, pondered: "What then is the cause of this fate!

43/44. "What then was the foul act committed by these great-souled ones, by Karṇa, by the sons of Draupadī, or by the slender-waisted daughter of the Pāñcālas [herself], who are [now] in this dreadful, foul-smelling region [of hell]. Surely I do not know of [any] wrongdoing of any of these righteously-acting ones!

45/46ab. "Having done what is the wicked son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, King Suyodhana, along with his companions, covered with glory, completely honored, sitting [in heaven], possessed of prosperity like the great Indra?

46cd/47. "These ones [are] knowers of all *dharma*, valiant, [have] the essence of the teachings of truth, foremost in the warriors duty, wise, [and are] sacrificers bestowing gifts to Brahmins; [so] on account of what has this disastrous change now [come about] by which [they] have gone to hell?

48. "Am I then asleep, am I awake? [Though] having reason, I do not understand! Or could this mental disturbance be my [own] mental delusion?"

49. Thusly did King Yudhiṣthira, filled with suffering and pain, his senses bewildered by anxiety, ponder such things variously.

50. And the Prince Yudhiṣthira, son of Dharma, violently manifested [his] anger and cursed the gods and even *dharma*.

51. Tormented by the awful smell, he spoke to the gods's envoy: "Kind sir, please go [back] to the vicinity of those of whom you are the messenger.

52. "I surely will not go [back] there, let it be known that I am staying [here]. O envoy, these brothers of mine are content because of me."

53/54. Thusly addressed by the wise son of Pāṇḍu, the envoy then went [back] to where Indra, King of gods [was] seated and made known the intention of the Dharma King, exactly in the manner spoken by the son of Dharma, O Prince.

18.3

Vaiśaṁpāyana said:

1. [Once] royal Yudhiṣthira King of *dharma* [had] stayed there a while, O descendent of Kurus, the gods headed by Indra came there.

2. Dharma himself, embodied, came to where that Yudhiṣthira the Kuru King was, in order to examine the King.

3. When the gods, whose bodies are resplendent, the deeds of whose ancestors were meritorious, came all together, O Prince, the darkness disappeared.

4. And those tortures of sinners were not seen there, nor the Vaitaraṇī river, nor the Kūṭaśālmali bushes.

5. The terrifying rocks and the little iron pots were not seen, and those mutilated bodies there on all sides which the king, son of Kuntī had seen, became invisible.

6. Then an auspicious, pure-smelling wind blew, O Bhārata, pleasant to feel, very cool, in the vicinity of the gods.

7/8. The *maruts* along with Indra, and *vasus* along with the Aśvins, *sādhyas*, *rudras* and likewise *ādityas*, and those other sky dwellers too, and the best accomplished seers, all came there together where [the king], splendorous son of Dharma was standing.

9. Then Śakra, Lord of gods, endowed with the utmost splendour, spoke this conciliatory speech to Yudhiṣṭhira:

10. "O great-armed Yudhiṣṭhira, the troops of gods are pleased with you; come, come, O tiger of men, enough of this, O King! By you success has been attained, O King, and the undying worlds are [now] yours as well.

11. "You should not grieve, hear my speech: hell inevitably is to be seen by every king, my dear.

12. "Two [different] sets belong to the virtuous and the sinful, O bull of men. He who enjoys the good deed [in heaven] first, afterwards goes to hell, [and] he who [suffers] the fate of hell first, afterwards comes to heaven.

13. "He who is a sinner for the most part comes to heaven first. Therefore you were sent [here first] in this way by me, desirous [of your] welfare, O Prince.

14. "Indeed it was by fraud that Droṇa was deceived by you regarding his son; so then by fraud also is hell shown to you, O King.

15. "And so in just this way have you, Pārtha [Arjuna], Bhīma, the twins, and dark Draupadī likewise gone to hell by fraud.

16. "Come, O tiger of men, they are surely released from sin. The royal allies of yours who were killed in battle have all come up to heaven. Behold them, O bull of men!

17. "And Karṇa the great archer, foremost of warriors, for the sake of whom you are pained, has gone to the highest success [heaven].

18. "Behold this lion of men, the offspring of the sun, O King, staying in his allotted place [in heaven], O great-armed one. Conquer your sorrow, O bull of men.

19. "And behold [your] other brothers as well, and indeed those royal allies, [all] arrived each at his own place. Let your mental fever disappear.

20. "Having experienced the pain already, O descendent of Kuru, from now on, wander along with me [in heaven], healthy and free from suffering.

21. "My child, receive the fruit of [your] charitable giving and of the meritorious actions which you won yourself through asceticism, O great-armed son of Pāṇḍu.

22. "Now gods and *gandharvas*, and divine *apsaras*es in the sky, whose clothing and apparel are without dust, must attend upon you, who are noble.

23. "O great-armed one, receive the great fruit of asceticism and [also] those [heavenly] worlds which were won through the performance of the Rājasūya rite and strengthened by the Aśvamedha rite.

24. "O Yudhiṣṭhira, worlds higher than [those of] kings, equal to [those of] Hariścandra, are yours O Pārtha. You will wander among them.

25. "You will wander there, where [are found] the sage-king Māndhātṛ, King Bhagīratha and Bharata, son of Duḥṣyanta.

26. "This, O Pārtha, is the holy river of the gods, purifying the three worlds, the Gaṅgā in the sky, O Indra of kings. Having bathed, you will go there [to those worlds].

27. "[Once] bathed here, your mortal nature will depart. You will be released of hostility, your suffering departed and your trouble gone."

28. Once the Lord of Gods spoke thusly to Yudhiṣṭhira Lord of the Kurus, Dharma, embodied manifestly [in visible form] spoke to his own son:

29. "Hail, hail, king of great wisdom. I am pleased, little son, by your devotion to me, [by your] truth-speaking, patience and self-restraint.

30. "This is the third test done by me for you, O King. You are not able to be shaken from your natural disposition by [any] means, O Pārtha.

31. "Previously you were tested [when] you were in the vicinity of Dvaita forest for the purpose of [getting] the joined fire sticks, and you accomplished it.

32. "[And] you were tested again by me in the form of a dog, my son, [there] when your brothers and Draupadī died, O Bhārata.

33. "That for the sake of your brothers you want to remain [in hell], this is the third [test]. You are virtuous, O Illustrious one, happy and free from stain.

34. "And Pārtha, your brothers are not hell-dwellers, O Lord of the people, this is an illusion occasioned by great Indra, lord of the gods.

35. "Hell is inevitably to be seen by all kings and so this excessive suffering came to you for a while.

36. "Neither Savyasācin [Arjuna], nor Bhīma, nor the bulls of men the twins, nor truth-speaking warrior Karṇa are deserving of hell for a long time, O Prince.

37. "Nor is the princess Kṛṣṇā deserving of hell, O Yudhiṣṭhira. Come, come, O foremost of the Bharatas, behold the Gaṅgā coursing through the three worlds."

38. Thusly addressed, that sage of kings your great-grandfather went along with Dharma and with all those whose abode is among the thirty [Gods].

39. The king, having plunged into that auspicious river of the gods, the pure Gaṅgā praised by seers, renounced his mortal body.

40. Then Yudhiṣṭhira the Dharma King, having become a divine form, free of enmity, his sorrow gone, was bathed in that water.

41. Then wise Yudhiṣṭhira the king of the Kurus went, surrounded by the gods, accompanied by Dharma, [and was being] praised by the great seers.

18.4

1. So then King Yudhiṣṭhira, being honored by the *devas* along with the troop of *maruts* and *ṛṣis*, went to where those bulls of the Kurus were.

2/3. There he saw Govinda, endowed with a holy divine form, indeed with a form [made] recognizable by means of a likeness to the one previously seen [on earth], [and], glowing with his own divine form, served by his divine weapons headed by

the discus [who had all] taken terrible divine human forms, [and] near [Govinda] sat heroic, glorious Phalguna [Arjuna].

4. Then in another spot the son of the Kurus saw Karṇa, best of warriors, accompanied by the 12 Ādityas.

5. In another spot he saw powerful Bhīmasena surrounded by the troop of *maruts*, endowed with a divine form.

6. Similarly the son of the Kurus saw Nakula and Sahadeva, in the place of the two Aśvins, glowing with their own fiery brilliance.

7. Likewise he saw standing [there] the daughter of the Pāñcālas [wearing] a garland of pink and blue lotuses, [who], had gone with a divine form to the heaven which is brilliant as the sun.

8. And so immediately King Yudhiṣṭhira wanted to question her. Then the blessed King of Gods Indra told him:

9/10. "This is Śrī in the form of Draupadī, not born of the womb, well-loved, sweet-scented, who became a human being for your sake, O Yudhiṣṭhira, born in the family of Drupada, supported by you [and your brothers]; this one indeed was fashioned by the spear-wielder [Śiva] for the carnal pleasure of you [and your brothers].

11. "These five illustrious *gandharvas*, of bright splendour and unbounded energy, O King, [are] the sons of Draupadī and [you and your brothers].

12. "Behold devout Dhṛtarāṣṭra, King of the *gandharvas*, know that this is the elder brother of [your] father.

13. "This is your elder brother [Karṇa], son of Kuntī, whose splendour is bright, son of the sun, [your] elder born before you, known as Rādheya; he now courses along with the sun. Behold him, O bull of men.

14. "O King of Kings, behold the heroic great warriors of Vṛṣṇi and Andhaka led by Sātyaki, and also [these other] bountiful great warriors [all residing] among the troops of Sādhyas, *devas*, *vasus* and *maruts*.

15. "Behold the unconquered son of Subhadrā, [the] great archer Abhimanyu, together with Soma, radiant as the moon.

16. "This is Pāṇḍu the great archer, joined with Kuntī and Madrī, your father who perpetually rises in his chariot to my presence.

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17. "Behold the prince Bhīṣma, son of Śaṁtanu, joined with the *vasus* [and] Droṇa at the side of Bṛhaspati — appease this guru!

18. "And [all] these other kings and warriors of yours, O Pāṇḍava, course along with the *gandharvas*, with *yakṣas* and similarly with good people.

19. "All sorts of kings have obtained this path of the Guhyakas as well; they are ones by whom the heavens are won through pure thoughts, words and deeds, [following the] renunciation of the body."

18.5

Janamejaya said:

1-4. Great-souled Bhīṣma and Droṇa, royal Dhṛtarāṣṭra, both Virāṭa and Drupada, likewise Śaṅkha and even Uttara, Dhṛṣṭaketu Jayatsena, and that King Satyajit, the sons of Duryodhana and Śakuni son of Subala, the courageous sons of Karṇa, and King Jayadratha, and [all] those such as Ghaṭotkaca, those others who were not told of, and those other kings of blazing forms who were mentioned there, for how much time did they stay in heaven, tell me.

5. Ah, is the place eternal [which now] belongs to those ones, O best of Brahmins? Or what path did those bulls of men finally obtain from their *karma*? This do I want to hear spoken by you, O Brahmin.

The Sūta said:

6. The priest-sage, thusly addressed, was allowed by great-souled Vyāsa to set about relating [the answer] to the king:

Vaiśaṁpāyana said:

7/8. O King, hear this secret of the gods, O bull of the Bharatas, which the ancient sage [Vyāsa], possessed of great splendour and divine eye, glorious, descendent of Parāśara, [faithful to his] great vows, deep in wisdom, knower of all, and knower of the paths of all deeds, spoke, O descendent of Kuru: Everyone must go at the end of their deeds, O Prince.[229]

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[229] For a close analysis of verses 18.5.5-8 see sections 4.2.1. and 4.2.2.

9. Bhīṣma whose splendour and brilliance are great, surely reached the *vasus* — indeed [these] 8 *vasus* are seen [here] O Bull of the Bharatas.

10. Now, Droṇa has surely been absorbed into Bṛhaspati, foremost of the Aṅgirases, while Kṛtavarman, son of Hṛdika, reached the host of *maruts*.

11. Pradyumna was absorbed into Sanatkumāra in the same manner by which he came; Dhṛtarāṣṭra attained those worlds of Dhaneśa [Kubera], difficult to approach.

12. Along with Dhṛtarāṣṭra [came] beautiful Gāndhārī. Pāṇḍu went to the dwelling of the great Indra along with his two wives.

13-15. And both Virāṭa and Drupada, and royal Dhṛṣṭaketu, Niśaṭha, Akrūra, and Sāmba, Bhānu, Kampa, Vidūratha, Bhūriśravas and Śala too, and King Bhūri, likewise Ugrasena, Kaṁsa, and heroic Vasudeva and Uttara that bull of men, along with his brother Śaṅkha — [all of] those foremost of men were absorbed into all of the gods.

16. That son of Arjuna, lion of men, Abhimanyu became the majestic son of Soma named Varcas, whose splendour is great.

17. That great-souled king [Abhimanyu]. having fought according to the warrior's duty as no man anywhere [ever had], was absorbed into Soma at the end of his deeds.

18. Karṇa reached his father the sun, O Bull of Men, Śakuni attained the Dvāpara while Dhṛṣṭadyumna [attained to] Agni.

19. All the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra [who were] demons of mighty strength, [now] prosperous great-souled ones, went to heaven, purified by weapons. Vidura and indeed King Yudhiṣṭhira were absorbed into Dharma.

20. The blessed *deva* Ananta, who supported the earth in accordance with Brahmā's command, entered the Rasātala [region].

21. The harem of Vāsudeva was [composed of] 16,000 women; eventually, O Janamejaya, they plunged into the Sarasvatī and they too, having become *apsaras*es, approached Vāsudeva.

22. All those great, heroic kings such as Ghaṭotkaca and so on who were killed in the great battle, assumed the form of *deva*s and *yakṣa*s.

23. Those who accompanied Duryodhana [who were] said to be *rākṣasas*, gradually reached the best worlds of all, O King.

24. Those bulls of men entered the home of the great Indra and of wise Kubera, and similarly the worlds of Varuṇa.

25. All of this [has now been] told to you in detail, O thou of Great Splendour, in its entirety: the deeds of the Kurus and of the Pāṇḍavas, O Bhārata.

The Sūta said:

26. The king Janamejaya, having heard this from that foremost of Brahmins during the pauses of the sacrificial rite, was exceedingly amazed.

27. And so the officiants brought that [sacrificial] rite of his to a close and Āstīka was pleased, having liberated the snakes.

28. And so he [Janamejaya] contented all the priests with sacrificial gifts and those [priests], honored by the king, then went [back] the way they came.

29. Having dismissed those priests that king Janamejaya also went back then from Takṣaśilā to Hāstinapura.

30. All of this told to you was said by Vaiśaṁpāyana, fully recounted at the command of Vyāsa, at the snake sacrifice of the king.

Appendix 2:
Translation of Books 17 and 18 of the *Bhāratamañjarī* of Kṣemendra

17

1. Having made obeisance to Nārāyaṇa, and to that best of men Nara, to the Goddess Sarasvatī [and to] Vyāsa, then the *Jaya* should be recited.

2. Now, having heard of the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis from Dhanaṁjaya [Arjuna], the son of Dharma [Yudhiṣṭhira], sighing, said "Obeisance to [all]-powerful Time!"

3-4. The *yoga* that is done by renouncing everything was undertaken by the brothers along with [Yudhiṣṭhira] whose dominion is truth, once he had given Duryodhana's [half of the] kingdom to Yuyutsu of worthy qualities, established Abhimanyu's son Parikṣit in his own kingdom [and] appointed Subhadrā as his [Parikṣit's] protector.

5-6. Having entrusted that knower of *dharma* [Parikṣit] to the ministers and priests, having performed a *śrāddha* and a meritorious renunciatory *iṣṭi* rite for his kinsmen, having abandoned [his householder's] fires into the water, having consoled the grieving citizens, [and] having taken leave of the goddesss Earth, Yudhiṣṭhira the companion of Draupadī, who had renounced everything and was engaged in *yoga*, set forth along with his younger brothers.

7. Then, having met with [Yudhiṣṭhira *et al*], the Lord Eater of Oblations [Agni] himself took the Gāṇdīva [bow] and those two great inexhaustible quivers from Pārtha [Arjuna].

8. A dog followed them, although keeping back carefully. Then eventually they reached the South-Western region.

9. There, having seen [the city] Dvāravatī filled with water by the ocean, they reached the northern region, having made a circumambulation of the earth.

10. Having passed the Himālayas, they reached a desert [and] saw Meru where [Indra's divine garden] Nandana is encircled by lofty peaks.

11. The daughter of Drupada, whose body was delicate as a Śirīṣa [flower], fell on that difficult-to-cross path without house or asylum.

12. Bhīma, having seen her bereft of life, said to Yudhiṣṭhira: "O King, this daughter of the king of the Pāñcālas is fallen on the ground!

13. "Although reflecting [on the matter], I do not see any fault of hers whatsoever. Why has she, having renounced her ascetic *yoga*, returned to dust?"

14. The son of Dharma, having listened to this, without turning [to look] back, said: "Her partiality was always especially for Arjuna."

15. When [this was] spoken by the king, Sahadeva fell on the ground. When he fell, the King, asked again [the cause] by Bhīma, said:

16. "He thought people were stupid because of pride in his wisdom." When [this was] said by the son of Dharma, Nakula fell to the earth.

17. Then the King, still walking along, asked by Bhīma, spoke again: "This one thought himself to be as handsome even as the God of Love and he could not tolerate competition."

18. When this was said by the king who was [still] walking, Dhanaṁjaya [Arjuna] fell. Asked again by Bhīma, the king said:

19. "Thinking himself to be heroic, he became weak on the battlefield." Saying this, his concentration unbroken, the king went on.

20. Then Bhīma fell [and] said to him: "I am fallen!". [Yudhiṣṭhira] said: "Bhīma, you had pride in your strength and ate too much."

21. And so he was then all alone, walking along followed by the dog. Yudhiṣṭhira clearly saw Indra approaching in a chariot.

22. Addressed by Indra [with the words] "O King, come to my fortress!", he said: "I do not want heaven with this body deprived of the dog."

23. The king of gods said to him: "How [could there be] a place for dogs in heaven? Who else but you [would] say that this dog must rise up to a heavenly abode?"

24. The the king said to him: "How can I bear to abandon one who is devoted [to me]? How [could there be] a place in heaven for a cruel person hating one who is devoted to him?

25. "If I have some good deed, O Lord of Gods, by that may dog go to heaven with his body. I cannot bear to renounce this one.

26. "Wise men consider the renunciation of a devoted one to be constituted of all evils, equivalent to the killing of a woman and the theft of a Brahmin's property."

27. When this was said by the Dharma King, Dharma, having renounced his dog-form, spoke to him: "My son, I am pleased with this virtuous behavior of yours.

28. "Formerly in Dvaita forest you were seen by me for the purpose of [getting] water. Hail to you! Go to the abode of the gods with your [mortal] body, O King!"

29. Thusly commanded by his father, having climbed into a chariot of abundant splendour, [ascended] the sacred steps [and] entered the dwelling of the gods.

30. Being praised by the gods along with the munis such as Nārada and the others, he shone like the sun amidst the stars of the king-sages.

31. Then he said to Indra: "I want [to go to] that place where my brothers and dark-skinned wife are."

32. Thousand-eyed [Indra] said to him: "You have attained the unattainable, the highest path along with king-sages: Do not indulge in mortal sentiments!"

33. Although addressed thusly repeatedly and strenuously by [Indra] the thunderbolt-wielder, the son of Dharma said "I want to find my brothers!" again and again.

18

1. Having made obeisance to Nārāyaṇa, and to that best of men Nara, to the Goddess Sarasvatī [and to] Vyāsa, then the *Jaya* should be recited.

2. Then Yudhiṣṭhira saw the Kuru King [Duryodhana] resembling Indra, with a shining crown and bracelet, endowed with the splendour of heaven.

3. Having beheld [his] younger cousin there, his anger roused, he said to [Indra] of a hundred sacrifices: "Hail to the *devas*, [I] must [offer] this farewell to heaven.

4-5. "Duryodhana [was] evil such that he caused the destruction of the earth. Where he [sits] resplendent in a magnificent seat, lofty as Mount Meru's peak,

that is not my dwelling place. I am going, I bow to you; where my heroic brothers are, that is my dwelling place now."

6. Then as the king [Yudhiṣṭhira] was speaking thusly, the gods said to their envoy whose thoughts were as swift as the wind, "Go forth to [his] brothers."

7. Going quickly by a path at the command of the envoy of the gods, he saw frightful men dwelling in the center of hell.

8-13ab. There in a cave of frightful darkness which was slimy from phlegm, marrow, blood, red flesh and hair, abounding in worms scattered over countless wet corpses, filled on all sides with the cries of crows, herons, cranes, and owls, possessed of a hundred-fold throng [of bodies] having stinking apertures on the corpses, with shores of burning hot sands, crags and saws, dreadful from the Śalmali [trees] and multitude of urns of oil, marrow and blood, horrible from huge burning pillars, stakes, thorns and razors with a shoreline filled with pus and the smell of raw flesh from the burning Vaitaraṇī river, [where could be heard] the sounds made by men and women being butchered in the forest of sword-leaves — there the son of Dharma heard the ever-dreadful weeping of sinners being boiled:

13cd-14. "O King, one moment! Do not turn back from here! The darkness is dispelled for us who are touched by your pure and cooling breezes. We are your brothers the Pāṇḍavas headed by Bhīma.

15. "And this is [your] beloved wife the queen, fine-hipped Kṛṣṇā." Having heard this, the king was woefully torn apart as though by lightning.

16-17ab. Indifferent to pleasure or pain, he stayed right there cursing fate harshly [and] said: "Alas! [My] thought is destroyed by the folly of the gods by whom these ones, [though] devoted to *dharma*, are abandoned in this torment.

17cd. "'This is delusion;' '[This is] clarity' — [here] there is no such distintion.

18-20ab. "They are among the wise who do not know the overstepping of *dharma*! Thinking 'What is this? Error? A dream? An illusion?,' I do not know, O Envoy of the Gods! Whose bad conduct is this? I am staying right here. Go, I have no reason [to return to] heaven where ill-behaved ones are praised [and] the virtuous are destroyed!"

21ab. The envoy of the gods, thusly addressed by the Dharma King, having gone [back] to Indra, approached quietly and reported everything [to him].

21cd-22. When Indra reached there [where Yudhiṣṭhira was] along with the gods such as Dharma and so on, nothing inauspicious was seen and a pure wind blew. Then the lord of *devas* [Indra] spoke to the sorrowful son of Dharma:

23. "This is not real, it is only an illusion shown by me here. Kings whose deeds are mixed inevitably have this vision [of hell].

24-25ab. "This is on account of your slaying of Droṇa [whereby you had] contact with a trace of untruth. Come, behold your brothers dwelling in their own divine place, the [daughter of] the Pāñcālas gone to the glory of heaven and [her] sons to immortality."

25cd-26. Thusly addressed by the king of Gods, Yudhiṣṭhira, his sorrow dispelled, having bathed in the waters of the heavenly Gaṅgā of celestial splendour at the invocation of Dharma, [and] having abandoned his mortal nature, went to the holy assembly of the gods.

27-30. There he saw the charms of the dancing of *apsarases*, singing *gandharvas* and *kiṃnaras*, [and] his own younger brothers ascended to their own place, Karṇa himself shown with Indra in the disc of the sun, and [he saw] in the disc of the moon that son Abhimanyu by whom [even the God of Love] Manmatha is surpassed in the appearance of his beauty, whose name is 'Splendour of the Moon;' [he saw] King Dhṛtarāṣṭra clearly as king of the *gandharvas*, Bhīṣma son of Śāṃtanu [as] a *vasu*, [his] guru Droṇa [as] Bṛhaspati, and Nārāyaṇa Lord of the Universe holding his shell, discus and mace.

31. Having seen those fundamental [divine identities] the portions of whom they had been born on earth [as], the son of Dharma approached the venerable place of eternal bliss proper to Hariścandra belonging to the dwellers in Nandana [garden] whose abode is a treasure itself.

32. That most excellent of kings of pure deeds shone, being saluted reverently on all sides by the kings Nahuṣa, Dilīpa, Dhundhumāra, Sagara, Bhagīratha, Rāma, and Kārtavīrya.

33. Having heard thusly the story of the Bhāratas made famous by Vaiśampāyana, Janamejaya, whose snake sacrifice was completed, turned back.

34. Having listened to this [story] told by the charioteer, the dwellers of Naimiṣa forest led by Śaunaka remained [there], enraptured and released from all care.

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Appendix 3:
Translation of Books 17 and 18 of the *Bālabhārata* of Amaracandra Sūri
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17

1. Having heard of the destruction of the Vṛṣṇis from Arjuna, the King was terrified by such [all-]powerful time, his mind became set upon the renunciation of everything.

2. The kingdom in the domain of Dhṛtarāṣṭra having been rejoined to Yuyutsu, [then Yudhiṣṭhira], with the approval of his kin, gave his own estate to Parikṣit.

3. The king directed Subhadrā, whose character was noble and meritorious [and who] was esteemed by the twice-born citizens, to protect [Parikṣit].

4. Having performed a *śrāddha* for his relatives and a final renunciatory rite, he cast his fires into the water like passions cast into the ambrosia of tranquility.

5. The king who had renounced everything, having consoled the distressed people of the city, and having bid farewell to the earth, went forth with his younger brothers, accompanied by Yājñasenī [Draupadī].

6. Then, having come there as though flaming up from an oblation, blameless Agni, having asked those royal ones, reclaimed the bow and quivers given previously.

7. Just as one's accumulated *karma* follows the life's breath, sense organs and intellect [in transmigration], so did one dog, although keeping back, follow those six who had renounced their homes.

8. Then they gradually approached the South-West region [and, although] seeing Dvāravatī submerged [in the ocean], those ones who were joined to *yoga* were not disturbed.

9. Then, having circumambulated the earth in a clockwise manner, accompanied by his several followers, the king went to the northern region, majestic as the sun.

10. Then these ones who had crossed the Himālaya by a path successfully, reaching a desert, saw Meru and its garden Nandana [in the distance].

11. There on that shelterless path bereft of asylum, the daughter of Drupada fell on account of abandoning her mind, as a fool [abandons his] intellect.

<div align="center">
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12. "[She was] completely faultless in [her] *yoga* and asceticism, marvelous in its tenacity (*sthitādbhuta*), O King, [and so] why does the daughter of Drupada sleep so long in the daytime like a lotus pond?"

13. The king, having heard this spoken by Bhīma, said, without turning [to look] back: "This one had too much a preference for the son of Indra [Arjuna]."

14. And when Sahadeva fell, the king, asked [again] by Bhīma, explained: "This one was conceited in his evaluation of [his own] intellect [but] considered the [whole] world dull and stupid."

15. And when Nakula fell, the king, asked again by Bhīma, said: "Because of pride in his appearance, he could not tolerate a rival [in appearance], even [if it be] the god of Love [himself]."

16. When Arjuna's fall to the earth occurred, the king, asked by the son of Vāyu [Bhīma], said: "This one went astray carelessly, [although] thinking himself a hero on the battlefield."

17. "I have fallen!" was said by Bhīma as he collapsed; then the king explained: "You ate too much and were [overly] proud of your strength."

18. And so that *dharma*-hero Yudhiṣthira reached the distant world, not even casting a glance [back] even when those kinsmen of his fell.

19. Walking along with unfailing concentration, with the dog following right behind him, O King, he saw Indra ahead, standing in his chariot.

20. Yudhiṣthira was called to by Indra with the ambiguous phrase, destined by fate for him [to hear]: "Come to my city with [your mortal] body"[230]; then Indra stepped down onto the ground.

21. "I will not [even] consider [going to] heaven without this dog. Shame indeed upon him who would arrive there [heaven] by abandoning a follower in distress!"

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[230] I am not sure whether there is supposed to be a play on words here as the term *vāgbhaṅgyā* suggests. "Come to my city with [your mortal] body" takes *dehī* as referring to Yudhiṣthira who has not died yet and still possesses his body; another reading could be "The soul must come to my city", i.e. the soul *per se* which is often referred to by this term (lit. that which possesses a body) - in which case the meaning seems to be that he must die first.

*22. "Even a swarm of black scorpions in the forest is not foresaken by the benevolent, even for the sake of rising to the summit of the gods.[231]

23. "Even those who violate cows, brahmins and *śivaliṇgas*, who are too lazy to bathe in the Gaṅgā, do not accept a person who has abandoned a dependent.

24. "Where is my *dharma* in renouncing this [dog]? How can there be a heavenly lot for me without him? You must therefore instruct me in deserting!"

25. When the *dharma*-knowing king said this, Indra said: "Where should this dog, bereft of good deeds or any such thing, go? My city?"

26. "Let there be heaven for this [dog], joined to his body, by means of the good deeds *I* have done." The king said this and was praised by the gods who were shaking their heads.

27. Then Dharma, releasing the dog form, finally [appeared in] his splendid [true] form [and], pleased, having embraced him on every limb, he said to the king:

28. "My child, my child, you were beheld by me, joyfully [when I was in the] form of a dog, I am pleased, ascend into the chariot, the eternal heaven now belongs to you"

29. By this command of [his] father, [Yudhiṣṭhira] who was wise in the full expanse of the law, having arrived at the chariot [and] the heavenly staircase, entered heaven with his [mortal] body.

30. Honoured by the heavens along with the *munis* such as Nārada and the others, he shone there among the sage kings like the moon among stars.

31. The king, after completing the journey to heaven, said to Indra: "I am to be led to that cheerful world where those kinsmen of mine abide." By [Indra was said] "Do not be swayed by your mortal nature here in the world of the triple heaven; this strong attachment must also be forever cast off here."

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[231] This and the subsequent verses marked with an asterix are particularly difficult; only a rough translation is offered in these cases.

18

1. Then, having beheld Duryodhana endowed with splendour shining forth along with his [Duryodhana's] brothers in heaven, that [Yudhiṣṭhira] whose anger was radiating out said to Indra:

2. "Hail to heaven where this sinner and tormentor of the world Suyodhana remains on a throne, not finding destruction [but rather] is honored!"

3. Am I supposed to behave thoughtlessly now? Heaven indeed is a place where castes are mixed up with one's relatives."

*4. So then the gods commanded their quick-witted messenger, saying "Show to the king the situation of his kinsmen."

5. And so, the king went forth by [the path] displayed to him, an awful path which bestows misery by death, imprisonment and so on, [and which has] foul smells and is difficult to pass through.

6. There he was made to hear the exceedingly pained sound, horrible to the ears, of his relatives being tortured and slain by various forms of execution.

7. "We are Bhīma, etc." — "This is Draupadī suffering greatly" — "Please stay a moment since we are contented by [your] purifying breeze."

8. Once they spoke thusly, the king, frozen on the spot, motionless as a pillar, cursed the wicked behavior of the god [and] spoke to the messenger of the gods:

*9. "I will stay here out of devotion to my family. Even this hell now becomes my heaven. As the Gaṅgā with her tributaries, [so now are] woes [and] pleasures to me.

10. "Hail to you, go! I bow to heaven and to those who dwell there, where the wicked are honored and those who behave righteously are forsaken."

11. Once he said this and the messenger had gone to Indra who stands in front of the other gods, the king [Yudhiṣṭhira] did not see anything of that hell any longer.

12. "What is this!" [Indra] the king of *maruts* sang forth clearly with a purifying breeze, consoling the king who was perplexed.

13. This difficult path shown to you through my power of illusion was the fruit of that little lie you spoke in stopping the guru [Droṇa].

14. Therefore behold now in the sky your relatives [enjoying] streams of the nectar of delight as well as the daughter of Drupada, gone among those who partake of heaven's glory.

*15. The son of Dharma was addressed by Dharma [with the words] "you are the gladdening of the speech of the lord of immortals [and] are shining like gold;" [Yudhiṣṭhira] entered liquified bliss as [gold] purified of its dross.[232]

*16. For [Yudhiṣṭhira]'s pleasure, those ones headed by *gandharvas* betook themselves with delight to the place among those enjoying nectar, with blossoming thickets of golden lotuses, [enjoying as it were] a downpour of streams of nectar [i.e. the *gandharvas*' music] in the hollow of their ears.

*17. For [Yudhiṣṭhira]'s pleasure, rows of solar drummers sent forth, without even striking their drums, the sound of dense and low-toned drums, and went forth among the rumblings of the troops of "rain-cloud elephants."

18. For [Yudhiṣṭhira]'s pleasure, the troops of dancing girls of the gods danced the Citramāruta form, the beauty of their faces and hands having the appearance of lotuses, their forms submerged in water.

*19. [Yudhiṣṭhira] whose soul was caused to sport in unique pleasures in water sports [and who was] oblivious to everything was made divine in form by the Gaṅgā, by exchanging his mortality [for immortality].

*20. He shone like a statue fashioned from the finest extracted particles of the sun whose drops of nectar by the hundreds of millions occasions the purification of illusion through time.

21. And then, going towards the assembly of the thirty gods in the presence of those who fashion all that is beautiful, whatever wondrous thing he desired to be given, he saw it was [already] in his possession.

22. He who had been shown the path by Indra, [now] calm [and] with copious celebrations, joined the assembly of the gods, taking in his own fame occasioned by the performance of the Rājasūya ritual sacrifice amidst divine songs.

23. There he beheld his brothers whose immortal and resplendent assemblies were vast and beautiful with troops of *apsaras*es spreading out and overrun with his

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[232] Until now the *kāvya* has been in *anuṣṭubh* but at this line the meter changes to "*rathoddhatā*" meter and the manuscript becomes flawed.

acquaintances and dear friends.

24. There the son of Dharma saw, by the invocation of the Lord of the thirty gods, Karṇa and Abhimanyu [rejoined] into the sun, Hari [rejoined] into the majesty of Hari, [Dhṛtarāṣṭra] the husband of Gāndhārī [rejoined] into the king of *gandharvas*, [Droṇa] husband of Kṛpī [rejoined] into the form of the guru, [Bhīṣma] the son of the Sindhu [rejoined] into the eighth *vasu*, as well as all those other ones among them of whom portions had descended to the world of mortals for the sake of destroying the burden of the end-time.

25. This king of the lunar dynasty ruled there at will, endowed with the splendour suitable for the place of Hariścandra waited upon by wondrous heroes [of the solar dynasty] such as Bhagīratha, Rāma, Dilīpa and so on, to whom the entire island [-world] is devoted.

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