ΠΑΝΔΩΙΧ AND ΣΙΤΑ:
ON THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SANSKRIT EPICS
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The Mahābhārata (MBh) and the Rāmāyaṇa (R) reflect the exploits of the “Pāṇḍavas” following the arrival and dispersal of the “Megalithic culture” c. 800–400 B.C. The Vedic (Yādava) trio of the two Aśvins and Uṇās, integrated with agricultural and pastoral deities, became the Vaiṣṇava trio.

THE MAHĀBHĀRATA AND THE MEegaliths

The Ṛgveda was mostly composed in the Punjab c. 1500–1200 B.C. The focus of the MBh is in the upper Ganges Valley, c. 900–700 B.C. (Buiten 1973: xxiv). In Vālmiki’s R, the hero’s domicile is in the middle Ganges Valley, and the old core is dated to c. 750–500 B.C. (Goldman 1984: I, 23) or c. 500–300 B.C. (Brockington 1998: 379). The texts reflect a gradual eastward move of the cultural center of the Indo-Aryan speakers (cf. Brockington 1998: 198).

King Janamejaya Pārīkṣita’s horse sacrifice is glorified in AB 8,21,3 = ṢB 13,5,4,2 = ṢṢṢ 16,9,1, one of the rare samples of “proto-epic” verses recited in Vedic royal rituals (cf. Weber 1891; Horsch 1966). According to its own testimony (1,40ff.), the MBh was first recited at King Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice (sarpasattra), in which snakes were victims thrown into fire. In the Vedic sarpasattra, kings and princes of the snakes in human form officiated as priests, and Janamejaya was one of the two adhvaryus, and the Brahman priest was Dvēśarāśtra Aitāvata (PB 25,15; BaudhŚŚ 17,18). In the MBh, Dvēśarāśtra is not only a Kuru king, but also an ancestor of the snakes sacrificed at the sarpasattra (1,52,13). The MBh thus both preserves and distorts Middle Vedic traditions connected with Janamejaya and Parīkṣita, whose descendants are referred to in BĀU 3,3,1–2 as a vanished dynasty (Weber 1852: 121, 177; 1891: 774; Buiten 1973: I, xxivf.; Shulman 1980: 120ff.; Minkowski 1989; Brockington 1998: 6).

The culture distinguished by the use of iron, horse, and Painted Grey Ware (PGW) (c. 1000–350 B.C.) is found lowest at all major sites associated with the main story of the MBh. It thus offers a suitable archaeological correlate to the earliest layers of the MBh (cf. Lal 1981; 1992; Buiten 1973: I, 11f.; Erdosy 1995: 79ff.; Brockington 1998: 133, 159–62). I have suggested that the early PGW culture with few and small towns (c. 1000–700 B.C.) represents the Middle Vedic culture and its Kuru kingdom, and the late PGW culture with many more towns including Mathurā (c. 700–350 B.C.) the Pāṇḍava period (Parpola 1984: 453ff.).

King Pāṇḍu and the five Pāṇḍavas are never once mentioned in any Vedic text (Weber 1853: 402f.; Hopkins 1901: 376, 385, 396; Horsch 1966: 284; Brockington 1998: 6). The Pāṇḍavas, therefore, have arrived on the scene only after the completion of Vedic literature. They could crush the Kurus by making a marriage alliance with the Kuru’s eastern neighbors, the Pañcālas. To consolidate their rule, the victorious Pāṇḍavas let themselves be grafted onto the Kuru genealogy and be represented as cousins of their former foes (Lassen 1847: I, 589–713; Weber 1852: 130–33; 1853: 402–4; Schroeder 1887: 476–82; Hopkins 1889: 2–13; 1901: 376).

The war was over and the epic in existence by c. 400–350 B.C.: Pāṇini refers to the joint worship of Vāsudeva and Arjuna (4,3,98), and mentions also Yudhiṣṭhira (8,3, 95), Hāśinapura (6,2,101), Andhaka-Vṛṣṇayāh (6,2,34), and Mahābhārata (6,2,38) (Weber 1852: 176; Hopkins 1901: 385, 390f.; Jaiswal 1981: 64ff.; Brockington 1998: 257).

Apart from the absence of their mention in Vedic texts, there are other indications pointing to the foreign,

A first sketch of this paper was published in Parpola 1998: 263ff. A preliminary version called “Bala-Rāma and Sītā: On the Origins of the Rāmāyaṇa” was presented at the 11th World Sanskrit Conference, held at Turin in April, 2000, and will be published in the CD-Rom containing the proceedings of that conference. I pay tribute to Stanley Insler with this revised version, enlarged to include my earlier thoughts about the formation of the Mahābhārata (Parpola 1984). Due to lack of space, many side issues have had to be cut out.
and specifically Iranian, origin of the Pandavas (cf. Parpola 1984). Their polyandric marriage, which shocked the people present (MBh 1,197,27–29; Hopkins 1889: 298f.), can be compared to the customs of the Iranian Massagetae (Herodotus 1,216). Hanging their dead in trees (MBh 4,5,27–29; Brockington 1998: 227) resembles the Iranian mode of exposure of the corpse to birds.

Foreign, northerly origin is suggested by their pale skin color, which the MBh (1,100,17–18) connects with the name of Pându, literally ‘pale’; the name Arjuna likewise means ‘white’ (Lassen 1847: I, 634, 641–43). Sanskrit pându-, pândura-, pândara- ‘white, whitish, yellowish, pale’, attested since c. 800 B.C. (ŚB, ŚĀ), are loanwords going back to the same Dravidian root as Sanskrit phala- ‘fruit’ (cf. Tamil palam ‘ripe fruit’) and pandita- ‘learned’ (differently Mayrhofer 1996: II, 70f., 201f.), namely pal- / pand- ‘to ripen, mature, arrive at perfection (as in knowledge, piety), change color by age, (fruit) to become yellow, (hair) to become grey, to become pale (as the body by disease [esp. leukoderma])’ (cf. DEDR 4004; Parpola 1984: 455).

This appellation probably originated in Gujarat and Maharashatra, where there is considerable evidence of a strong Dravidian substratum (cf. Parpola 1994: 170ff.). The Pândavas’ hiding in Vīrāṭanagara (Bairāṭ near Jaipur), their alliance with Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, and the location of their first kingdom in the wooded southern half of Kurukṣetra suggest that they probably entered the subcontinent from the west, via Sindh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. The MBh (2,23–29) and early northern Buddhist texts (cf. Weber 1853: 403) speak of the Pândavas as marauders over wide areas, also in north India.

If the Pândavas were foreigners of Iranian affinity coming to India c. 800–400 B.C., do they have any counterpart in the archaeological record? In my opinion (cf. Parpola 1984), a good match is the “Megalithic” culture, first attested c. 800 B.C. at sites such as Mahurjhari and Khapa in Vidarbha in NE Maharashatra. These oldest graves are simple stone-circles, in which people were buried with weapons and horses; the horse-furniture especially has parallels in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and western Iran. The circular huts with wooden posts and a fireplace are similar to the yurts used by the nomads of Central and Inner Asian steppes.

After their arrival in western India, the carriers of the Megalithic culture adopted the Black-and-Red Ware pottery (of local Chalcolithic origin) and during the following several centuries spread over wide areas, mainly southwards to the Deccan, south India, and Sri Lanka. In many regions, folklore associates the megaliths with the Pândavas. Numerous iron tridents suggest a Śaiva religion. Martial traditions of Megalithic origin still continue in the Deccan, where horsemen accompanied by dogs worship Śaiva deities with tridents in yurt-like shrines (Sontheimer 1989: 26ff.). In Tamil Nadu the Megalithic culture continued till the second century A.D. and is reflected in the Old Tamil heroic poetry. (Cf. Deo 1973; 1984; Leshnik 1974; 1975; Allchin & Allchin 1982: 344f.; McIntosh 1985; Ghosh 1989: I, 110–30 and 243–51; Maloney 1975: 6ff.; Parpola 1984: 458f.)

THE RĀMAYĀNA AND THE MEGALITHS

Most notable among the attempts to correlate archaeological cultures with the R (cf. Brockington 1998: 398–400) is that with the early Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW). This was suggested by B. B. Lal after excavating sites identified as being Rś Ayodhyā, Nandigrāma, Śrīgaverapura, and Bharadvāja’s āśrama. George Erdosy (1995: 100–105) in his assessment of all radiocarbon dates places the early NBPW at 550–400 B.C., which nearly agrees with Brockington’s date for the first phase of the R, 500–300 B.C.

Christian Lassen (1847: I, 535) proposed that the R “contains the legend of the first attempt of the Āryans to extend their power southwards by warring expeditions.” Albrecht Weber (1871: 3–5) was inclined to accept this view, though it was clear to him (p. 29f.) that the poem was composed in north India and that its author did not have any exact knowledge of the southern parts of the subcontinent. Present-day research agrees on this relative ignorance of the south, which has led many scholars to locate Laṅkā somewhere in Madhya Pradesh; while John Brockington (1998: 420, 423) opts for this alternative, Robert Goldman (1985: 28) finds it unlikely, noting that “the poet knew of an island kingdom, whether real or mythical, said to lie some distance off the coast of the Indian mainland.” Indeed, as early as the second or third century A.D., an Old Tamil poem (Akanāṇuru 70) refers to Kōṭi (= Dhanaśkōṭi, the tip of mainland opposite to Adam’s Bridge in Ceylon) as the place from which the victorious Rāma crossed over to Laṅkā (cf. Hart 1975: 61f.).

The archaeology of early historical Sri Lanka, so far largely ignored in this connection, has become much clearer than before only recently. Robin Coningham (1995: 159–69) gives a detailed analysis of the stratigraphy of Anurādhapura and a rapid survey of other sites (170ff.). The oldest, “Mesolithic” period is evidenced by locally manufactured stone tools. In the second, “Iron Age” period the habitation area of Anurādhapura was c. 18 hectares with circular huts indicated by post-holes. People had “typical Black and Red burnished ware,” iron, and cattle. Radiocarbon-based dates are
c. 600–450 B.C., but the period may have started as early as c. 800 B.C. In the “Early Historic 1” period (c. 450–350 B.C.), the site and the circular huts are larger, and there are strong similarities with South Indian Megalithic burial sites. The pottery is still dominated by Black and Red burnished ware. Horse bones are found, and indications of a major expansion of trade and manufacturing of conch shell, iron ore, amethyst, and quartz. In the “Early Historic 2” period (c. 350–275 B.C.), the site is more than 66 hectares and surrounded by a defensive wall. Finds include mother of pearl, cowrie and conch shells, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, and carnelian from Gujarat, five Brahmi (!) inscriptions on potsherds, and, towards the end, coins stamped with a single arched hill or caitya. The “Early Historic 3 and 4” periods (c. 275–225 and 225–150 B.C.) have also yielded typically Hellenistic objects.

Widespread evidence covering the entire island suggests that Sri Lanka was inhabited only by tribes of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers until c. 800–600 B.C., when agriculture and cattle-raising were introduced by an Iron Age culture characterized by “Megalithic” burials and Black-and-Red Ware. It is so similar to the Iron Age Megalithic culture of the Indian mainland that its spread must be ascribed to actual movements of people. But where exactly did these settlers come from? It is sensible to seek an answer from the legends in the chronicles of Sri Lanka (cf. Coningham 1995: 156–59).

COLONIZATION OF SRI LANKA

The legend of the colonization of Sri Lanka is related in the Dipavamsa (Dip, chs. 9–11) and with slight variation in the Mahāvamsa (Mhv, chs. 6–10), written c. A.D. 400 and 500 respectively, but based on older records (cf. Geiger 1912: ix; Hinüber 1996: 87–91; Lamotte 1958: 129–35). This legend derives the Sinhalas from Gujarat, which is most reasonable on the basis of linguistic evidence, for the best experts classify Sinhalese with Gujarati and Marathi (cf. Lamotte 1958: 132; Masica 1991: 451–49). Pali, too, is closest to Aśoka's inscriptions at Girnār in Gujarat, and is generally considered nowadays to have originated in western India (cf. Hinüber 1986: 20). Gujarat and Maharashtra are also precisely the areas where the Megalithic culture seems to have spread first.

At first seven hundred Sinhalas led by Prince Vijaya came to Sri Lanka from Sihapura (Sihapura) in Lāla (Lāṭa in southern Gujarat). “Prince Vijaya was daring and uneducated; he committed most wicked and fearful things, plundering the people.” He was therefore expelled by his father, King Sihabāhu. Vijaya and his men sailed down the west coast, stopping at the cities of Bhrūkacakcā (Broach in Gujarat) and Suppāra (Sūrppāraka = Sopāra near Mumbai). In both places they were offered hospitality and honors, but during their months-long sojourns Vijaya and his men exasperated the inhabitants with their “cruel, savage, terrible and most dreadful deeds” which included “drinking, theft, adultery, falsehood, and slander.” Finally they arrived at the island of Laṅkā. This happened when the Buddha reached the parinirvāṇa. In nine months Vijaya and his men destroyed the host of the Yakkhas who had earlier occupied the island. Vijaya founded Tambapāṇi, the first town in the island of Laṅkā. After having ruled thirty-eight years, Vijaya sent a message to his brother Sumita in Sihapura, asking a relative to take over the rule of Laṅkā after his death.

Vijaya is usually dated to the years 1–38 from the Buddha's parinirvāṇa or c. 486–448 B.C., Paṇḍu-Vāsudeva to 38–39/448–447 B.C., and so on (thus Lamotte 1958: 134). However, Laṅkā is said to have been kingless for one year (Mhv, ch. 8), and Paṇḍu-Vāsudeva came from Sihapura on a separate mission. The Vijaya story may be just an attempt to fill the earlier history with a vague memory of the first immigration much earlier: it seems to me that the regular dynastic record was started only with the arrival of Paṇḍu-Vāsudeva, whereas it was continuous (with regard to the oldest period, Geiger [1912: xff.] felt “a certain distrust of the tradition and traditional chronology from the very fact that Vijaya's arrival in Ceylon is dated on the day of the Buddha's death”). Indeed Lassen (1852: II, 96f.) has suggested that Vijaya does not actually refer to any specific person but to an event, the “conquest” of Sri Lanka. In any case, the statement that Vijaya found the island occupied by yakṣas only cannot be reconciled with both the archaeological and the historical chronology, if the yakṣas denote small-sized ancestors of the later Veḍas, the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. Like the “cruel and savage” Vijaya, the Rāvana of the epics may symbolize the early rulers of the island.

The Mhv (chs. 8ff.) records some events soon after Paṇḍu-Vāsudeva had arrived and married Bhadda-Kaccāṇā that could have given rise to the theme of the R: it was predicted that the son of the queen's daughter, the lovely Cittā, would destroy his maternal uncles and usurp the power. Princess Cittā was therefore kept as a prisoner in the palace, in an apartment built on a single pillar, accessible only through the dormitory of the king, and the entrance was guarded by a female servant inside and by one hundred armed men outside. Bhadda-Kaccāṇā's mother sent her seven sons (one called Rāma according to the commentary) from India to Laṅkā to
see their sister, and one of them, prince Dighāyu, had a son who conceived an ardent passion for Cittā.  

Weber (1871: 3–5) has already suggested that Rāvaṇa probably hails from north India, as he is described as worshippers Brahmanical divinities, and his father is Sage Pulastya, ancestor of a Brahmanical clan and son of the Brahmanical God of Creation, Prajāpati (MBh 3,258,11). Moreover, Hanuman sees in Rāvaṇa's palace in Lāṅkā noble horses from countries in the northern Indus Valley, Ārāṭṭa, Kamboja, and Vālhika (Weber 1871: 29f.). In this paper, I cannot pursue the study of Rāvaṇa much further, but will add a few observations. The term used by the Sri Lankan tradition of the previous inhabitants, yakka / yakṣa, is of course of North Indian origin and tells something of the religion of the earliest immigrants. Most probably it was Vijaya who introduced the impressive yakṣa cult of exorcism and sorcery that is still alive in Sri Lanka (Kapferer 1991, 1997). Rāvaṇa himself is a magician, and propitiated Prajāpati with asceticism and human sacrifices for the sake of boons (MBh 3,259,15ff.).

The yakṣīṇī Kuveṇī, with whom Vijaya had a liaison, helped him to victory over the yakṣas; Sinhalese myths identify her with Goddess Kālī (cf. Kapferer 1991: 167). In order to obtain victory in battle, Rāvaṇa's son Indraji sacrificies at a terrible-looking banyan tree connected with Goddess Nikumbhilā, alias Bhadra-Kāli (R 6,71,13–22; 6,74,2–4; 7,25,2ff.). This has a parallel in the human sacrifices to a banyan tree for the sake of victory that the Dhonasākha Jātaka (no. 353) reports from Taxila in northern Indus Valley (Parpola 1994: 259).

The Purāṇas associate Rāvaṇa and his brother Kubera with the Himalayas. When people migrate, they often transfer the name of their old domicile to their new habitation. Sinhapura, Vijaya's home town in Gujarat, has a namesake, Sinhapura, in the Indus Valley, conquered by the Pāṇḍavas (MBh 2,24,19); according to Xuan-Zang, this Sinhapura was c. 200 km SE of Takṣaśilā (Beal 1884: I, 143). In the next verse (2,24,20), the MBh mentions the Cola as a people crushed by the Pāṇḍavas, and people called Cola are otherwise known only from Tamil Nadu in south India (Parpola 1984: 452). Moreover, Vijaya's brother Sumitta, King of Sinhapura, married a princess of the Madra country in upper Indus Valley (cf. also Lassen 1852: II, 102, n. 4).

PĀŃDVAŚ OF SOUTHERN MADHURĀ

The second Śiṁhala king was called Pāṇḍu-Vāṣudeva. Pāṇḍu(ka) figures in names of other Sinhalese kings as well, and associates them with the Pāṇḍavas of the MBh (thus also Lassen 1852: II, 102f.), whose father Pāṇḍu is called Pāṇḍu (Cullavagga 64,43) or Pāṇḍurājā (Jātaka V, 426) in Pāli texts. Pāṇḍu-Vāṣudeva's father-in-law, who ruled in a kingdom on the Ganges river, was likewise called Pāṇḍu. He belonged to the Śākya clan, being a relative of the Buddha. Śākya is derived from Śaka, one of the principal names of Iranian steppe nomads. Its association with the name Pāṇḍu is an additional hint of the Iranian origin of the Pāṇḍavas.

The beginning of the second phase (c. 450–350 B.C.) of the Megalithic culture of Sri Lanka coincides almost exactly with the traditional dates for Pāṇḍu-Vāṣudeva's rule. This phase is said to resemble greatly the Megalithic culture of South India. These archaeological parallels are mirrored in the chronicles. According to Mhv (ch. 7), a fierce demoness (yakkhini) called Kueṇi or Kuvaṇṇa had fallen in love with Vijaya and helped the invader to kill the Yakkhas who lived in their cities of Lāṅkāpura and Sirīsavatthu. They had children. But when his companions wanted to perform the royal consecration for Vijaya, he said he would accept the proposal only if he obtained a queen of high rank. The companions sent a delegation with jewels and other presents to Southern Madhurā (dakkhiṇa-madhurā); the king ruling there, called Pāṇḍu and Pāṇḍava, decided to send his daughter Vijayā in marriage to Vijaya and seven hundred daughters of his nobility to Vijaya's retinue of seven hundred men. After marrying Pāṇḍava's daughter, Vijaya rejected Kuveṇi, sending her off from his house but promising to maintain her with a thousand bali offerings.

Southern Madhurā is modern Madurai in Tamil Nadu, the capital of the Pāṇḍya kings, whose dynastic name is irregularly derived from Pāṇḍu (Pat. on Vārtt. 3 on Pān. 4,1,168). The Sri Lankan kings kept contact with this city also later on (cf. Malalasekera 1937: II, 439). Megasthenes, writing c. 300 B.C., refers to the Pāṇḍya country when speaking of the Indian Heracles:

this Heracles . . . had only one daughter. Her name was Pandææa [Pandatē], and the country in which she was born, the government of which Heracles entrusted to her, was called Pandææ after the girl. . . . Some other Indians tell of Heracles that, after he had traversed every land and sea, and purged them of all evil monsters, he found in the sea a new form of womanly ornament . . . the sea margarita [pearl] as it is called in the Indian tongue. Heracles was in fact so taken with the beauty of the ornament that he collected this pearl from every sea and brought it to India to adorn his daughter . . . among the Indians too the pearl is worth three times its weight in refined gold. (Arrian, Indica 8,6–13, trans. Brunt 1983: 329–31)
The Arthaśāstra (2,11) mentions as sources of pearls several places along the coasts of southernmost India and northern Sri Lanka, among them Pāṇḍya-kavāṭa and Tāmraparṇi. Tāmraparṇi is the name of the chief river of the southernmost (Tirunelveli) district of Tamil Nadu, at the mouth of which was the Pāṇḍya port town of Kōrkai famed in Old Tamil literature for its pearl fishery (cf. Subrahmanian 1966: 329). Tāmraparṇi is also the name of the first Sinhalese capital on the north coast of Sri Lanka, called Tambapaṇṭi in Mhv 7.38–42 and Tappobane by Onesicritus, the admiral of Alexander the Great, who learned it as the name of the whole island in 325 B.C. in the Indus Valley. (The Anurādhapura excavations have confirmed the contact to Indus Valley at this time.) Vijaya's contacts would have been with Kōrkai, before the capital was moved to Madhurā inland (Maloney 1970: 604–6; Parpola 1984: 450).

The Pāṇḍya capital is called “southern Madhurā” to distinguish it from “northern Madhurā,” i.e., Mathurā, the famed domicile of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, after which the Pāṇḍya Madhurā obviously was named (cf. Dessigane et al. 1960, 1: xiv; Sircar 1971: 27 n. 1; Hardy 1983: 156). This is suggested also by the name of the second Sinhala king coming from Gujarāt, Paṇḍu-Vāsudeva. It seems to me that it was this second wave of Paṇḍu princes coming by sea to Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu who brought with them the Vaiṣṇava religion to the south. This is suggested also by the legend of the God Uppalavanḍa (= Sanskrit Utpalavarna ‘having the color of blue lotus’) being appointed by the Buddha as the guardian deity of the island and taking the immigrants under his protection, even if the Mhv (ch. 7) associates this with Vijaya (cf. Lassen 1852: II, 98ff.). According to Champakalakshmi (1981: 34), the earliest form of Vaiṣṇava religion in South India is the Pañcavītra, i.e., the worship of the five Vṛṣṇi or Yādava heroes, in particular Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and his elder brother Bala-Rāma, worshipped both independently and together in Tamil Nadu in the early centuries of the Christian era (p. 35). Such a migration of the Yādavas is known from the northern Sanskrit sources too: Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva moved from Mathurā to Gujarāt, where he founded the coastal city of Dvārakā or Dvārāvati. Sanskrit dvāra ‘door’ corresponds to Tamil kavāṭam / kapāṭam ‘fold of a door’, found in the names Pāṇḍya-kavāṭa, one of the pearl sources in the Arthaśāstra (2,11,2), as well as Kapāṭapuram, legendary seat of one of the ancient Tamil literary academies (Maloney 1970: 612f.; Parpola 1984: 453). According to the Old Tamil tradition, Sage Agastya brought the eighteen Vēḷir chiefs and the rulers of the Aruviḻa country from Dvārakā. The Ay rulers of the eighth–ninth century south Travancore likewise traced their descent from the Yādavas (Champakalakshmi 1981: 34).

NORTHERN MADHURĀ AND BALA-RĀMA

This Heracles is chiefly honoured by the Surasenians, an Indian tribe, with two great cities, Methora and Clisobora [Kleisóbra]; the navigable river Iomanes flows through their territory. Megasthenes says that the garb this Heracles wore was like that of the Theban Heracles by the account of the Indians themselves; he also had a great many sons in this country, for this Heracles too wedded many wives, but he had only one daughter. Her name was Pandaea.... (Arrian, Indica 8,5–7, trans. Brun 1983: 327–29)

Practically all scholars have identified the Indian Heracles with Kṛṣṇa worshipped by Śūrasenas in Mathurā on the Yamunā river. A singular exception is James Tod, who in 1835 identified Heracles with Bala-Deva, the god of strength (bala). Strength is a distinctive characteristic of Greek Heracles, and there are other reasons as well that make me think Tod was right. Textual and iconographic evidence from c. 400 B.C. onwards show that Bala-Rāma was in early Viṣṇuism a very important deity, especially in the Mathurā area (see Sircar 1971: 16ff.; Jaiswal 1981: 52ff.; cf. Brockington 1998: 261f., 266f.). Andreas Bigger (1998) has criticized this “received” view, but his own deconstruction of Bala-Rāma, based on a text-level analysis of the MBh, is not always convincing and rather contradicted by the Old Tamil poems of the first centuries A.D. (not considered by Bigger):

In Pur. 56, Krishna is invoked for his fame, Balarāma for his strength. Krishna is described as having a body like blue sapphire, having a bird (presumably the garuḍa) on his flag, and being accompanied by Balarāma, who has a body the color of a conch, a plow for his weapon, and a palmyra for his banner. (Hart 1975: 57)

Mathurā is called Madhurā ‘sweet’ not only in Pāli sources but also by Patañjali in his Mahābhāṣya c. 150 B.C. (cf. Weber 1873: 380ff.). The form Madhurā figures in the MBh too, where the name is explained as coming from the demon Madhu, who lived in Madhu-vana on the Yamunā river but was slain by Kṛṣṇa, “the killer of Madhu.” The “demonic” god earlier worshipped at Madhurā seems to have been a snake deity connected with plowing and identified with Śiva (see further below), whose names listed in the MBh include Madhu and who was addicted to drinking wine (madhu). His cult
was then absorbed into that of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva by transferring all the attributes of this earlier local god to Kṛṣṇa's "elder brother" Bala-Rāma, who is, among other things, a great wine-drinker. Demon Madhu (with Kaitabha: cf. Pāli keṭubha 'Brahmin ritualist') is said to have robbed from Brahmā the Vedas regained by Viṣṇu; a Vedic tradition therefore prevailed at Mathurā before Kṛṣṇaism.

THE VAISNAVA TRIO

In the Veda, madhu is specifically associated with the Aśvins (cf. Macdonell 1897: 49f., 52; Zeller 1990: 119). These divine charioteers, twin sons of the Sky (divó ná-pātā), probably represent (white) day and (black) night (as was suggested by Max Müller, cf. Zeller 1990: 7f.). In RV 3,55,11, day and night are spoken of as twin sisters (yamāyā) who have assumed different colors, one shining bright (tāyor anyāt rocate), the other black (kṛṣṇām anyāt); the Aśvins, too, are twins and are identified with day and night (MS 3,4,4 ahorātrē vā aśvīnā). The Aśvins drive around the world in a triple chariot accompanied by the fair goddess of Dawn (Uśas), daughter of the Sky or Sun (Śūre / Śūro duhitā, Śūryā), their sister and wife (cf. Zeller 1990: 100ff.). This trio has a counterpart in the divine horsemen of the Greeks, Kastor and Poluleüikēs (originally Poluleüikēs 'much shining'), who are sons of the sky god Zeus and brothers of Helen, as well as in the Lithuanian twin gods expressly identified with the morning and evening star wooing the daughter of the sun (cf. Zeller 1990: 8, 97f.).

Many of the Aśvin hymns of the RV belong to the Kāñka family of poets that was associated with the early Vedic tribes of Yadu and Turvaśa, from whom the Yādavaeas are descended. It therefore appears very likely, as has been proposed by Sen (1976: 124–27), that the trio of Aśvins and their sister / wife is the model of the early Vaiṣṇava trio consisting of two brothers connected with the colors white and black and their sister / wife. Chariotry can be added to the common characteristics mentioned by Sen. In the MBh, the 'black' Vāsudeva is the charioteer of the 'white' car-fighter Arjuna; their joint worship is mentioned by Pāṇini (4,3,98) c. 400–350 B.C. I suspect that the name of the Śimhala king Paṇḍu-Vāsudeva means 'devotee of Paṇḍu ('the white one' = Arjuna or Bala-Rāma) and Vāsudeva'. The two brothers Vāsudeva and Bala-Rāma and their sister (called variously Ekānaṃśā, (Śu)Bhadra, or Añjana) were a popular trio in early Vaiṣṇava iconography and still in Puri (cf. Jaiswal 1981: 68f.; Brockington 1998: 341; Yokochi 1999: 74). In the MBh (1,211–12), Arjuna marries Vāsudeva's sister Subhadra; but in the Skanda-Purāṇa, Subhadra is both the sister and wife of Vāsudeva. A whole chapter of the Old Tamil epic Cilappatikāram describes the pastoral dance performed by Kṛṣṇa, his beloved Piṇḍai, and Balārāma at Dvārakā (cf. Champakalakshmi 1981: 47). Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sitā, too, are usually depicted as a trio in the iconography (cf. Ramachandra Rao 1992: VI, 26–28), and in the Dasa-ratha Jātaka, Sitā is a sister of the two brothers, yet married by Rāma (cf. Weber 1871: 1; Jaiswal 1981: 142).

ΠΑΝΟΙΤΗ AND ΣΙΤΑ

Oskar von Hinüber (in Wirth and Hinüber 1985: 1110) has suggested that Greek Pandæa may correspond to Sanskrit Pāṇḍeya 'daughter of Pāṇḍu'. In Megasthenes' account, Heracles is both the father and husband of Pandæa:

In this country where Heracles' daughter was queen, the girls are marriageable at seven years, and the men do not live longer than forty years. There is a story about this among the Indians, that Heracles, whose daughter was born to him late in life, realizing that his own end was near, and having no man of his own worth to whom he might give his daughter [ous ekhonta hótoi andri ekdşi tên paída heúdoi epa-kstzi], copulated with her himself when she was seven, so that their progeny might be left behind as Indian kings. Thus Heracles made her marriageable and thenceforward the whole of this line which began with Pandæa inherited this very same privilege from Heracles. (Arritian, Indica 9, 1–3, trans. Brunt 1983: 331)

When doing research on the Śāvitri legend, I stumbled upon a Sanskrit parallel to this account. (For the following, see Parpola 1998; 2000.) Princess Śāvitri's father, King Aśvapati of Madra, fails to marry off his daughter in time, and therefore sends her to search for and choose a husband on her own. The texts do not directly indicate that the king had had an incestuous relationships with Princess Śāvitri, but they do quote in this context a Śmrītī stating that if a girl sees her first menses in her father's house, the father incurs a great sin. According to MBh 3,277,32, Aśvapati asks Śāvitri to find a husband "equal to herself" (sadrśam ātmanah) as no wooer is forthcoming, but according to the Skanda-Purāṇa (7,166,16), Aśvapati says that however much he looks, he cannot find for his daughter a bridegroom who in worth is equal to himself (vicārayan na paśyam varam tulyam ihātmanah).

In the Śāvitri legend, the human couple (Princess Śāvitri and Prince Satyavat) corresponds to the divine
couple (Goddess Sāvitrī and God Brahmā). It was through the grace of Goddess Sāvitrī and her husband that the princess was born, and both the human and the divine Sāvitrī along with their husbands are to be worshipped in the ritual of vaṭa-sāvitrī-vrata that is associated with the legend. Even the fate of the human couple has its counterpart on the divine level. In accordance with the prophecy of Sage Nārada, the husband (Satyavat alias Citrāśva, the young “alter ego” of Sāvitrī’s father Aśvapati) dies after one year has passed from his wedding, with his head on the lap of Princess Sāvitrī. Sāvitrī as a faithful wife, Satī, follows her husband to death when Yama comes to fetch him, and with her loyalty gains his life back.

Parallel to this, the Skanda-Purāṇa (3.1.40) tells how the creator god Brahmā alias Prajāpati has sex with his own daughter Vāc and is therefore killed by Śiva, but Brahmā’s wives Sarasvatī and Gāyatrī pacify Śiva and make him join Brahmā’s severed head with the body. This myth is directly based on a Vedic myth most explicitly told in AB 3.33: Prajāpati is guilty of incest with his daughter Vāc and is killed by Rudra in punishment. Vāc ‘speech, voice, sound’ is another name of Goddess Sāvitrī, known best as the holiest stanza of the Veda composed in the Gāyatrī meter: its recitations at sunrise and sunset, and (later) at noon, are considered to manifest the Goddesses Gāyatrī, Sāvitrī, and Sarasvatī.

Prajāpati thus had an incestuous relationship with his daughter Vāc, who is explicitly identified with the goddess of Dawn (Uśas or Sūryā or Sāvitrī) and had to die in punishment for this sin. Pandaie’s incestuous father Heracles also died soon after the copulation. Pāṇḍu, the father of the Pāṇḍavas, after he had killed a mating deer, was cursed to die if he ever copulated again, which came to pass when he had intercourse with his wife Mādri. Mādri was a princess of the Madra country, and ascended the funeral pyre of Pāṇḍu, resolute as the goddess Dhṛiṇī. In both respects Mādri resembles another princess of the Madra country, namely Sāvitrī, who is the prototype of a Satī, and the human counterpart of Goddess Sāvitrī, the wife-daughter of Brahmā / Prajāpati. We have seen that the female member of the early Vaiṣṇava trio (Krṣṇa’s sister Subhadrā, Rāma’s wife Sītā) seems to continue the Goddess of Dawn (Sūryā / Sāvitrī) in the trio that she forms with the two Aśvins. Not only Sāvitrī but this entire earlier trio appears to have been worshipped in the Madra country, because Nakula (clever like Krṣṇa) and Sahadeva (whose name is a synonym of Baladeva), the Pāṇḍavas sired by the Aśvins, had Mādri as their mother. Mādri’s brother Śālyā, King of Madra, had Goddess Sītā in his banner, and TB 2.3.10 mentions Sītā Sāvitrī as the daughter of Prajāpati. All this suggests that Pandaie, Uśas / Sūryā / Sāvitrī, and Sītā are each other’s aliases.

**FURROW AND PLOW**

Albrecht Weber considered Rāma’s spouse Sītā to be at least partly mythical. An agricultural goddess Sītā, the personified furrow, is known from the Rgveda (4.57.6–7), and her worship is described in detail in PGs 2.17; according to the GGS (4.4.27–29), she was to be worshipped at plowing. It makes sense that the husband of ‘furrow’ is the god of plowing. Weber therefore kept asking already one hundred fifty years ago, has the hero of the R developed from Rāma Halabhṛt, i.e., was he originally just a personification of an agricultural divinity like Sītā? (Weber 1850: 175; 1871: 7ff.). Bala-Rāma’s distinctive iconographic emblems, the plow (läṅgala, hala, phāla) and pestle for pounding grain (muṣala), definitely mark him as primarily an agrarian deity. The agricultural connection is also plain from his alternative name Saṃkarṣaṇa, which is derived from the activity of plowing (kṛṣṭi). Weber’s hypothesis is supported by the fact that Bala-Rāma (this name is not found in the MBh) is actually 143 times called just Rāma in the MBh (cf. Bigger 1998: 9).

The plow is instrumental in placing the seed in the womb of the earth, and plowing thus symbolizes sexual intercourse. But the plow also creates the furrow, thus representing its generator. In R 1.66.14–15, Sītā emerges out of the furrow when Janaka the king of Mithilā is plowing a field, and is given the name Sītā and raised as his daughter by Janaka:

_in the Uttarakāṇḍa (R 7.88.9–14), Sītā finally returns to her mother Earth: the goddess comes to fetch her and the two disappear underground. In the Uttarārāma-carita, Janaka is called śrīradhvaja, 'having the plough in his banner' (Weber 1871: 8). Janaka’s name denotes ‘progenitor, father’. It is one of the names used in the Purāṇas of the Hindu creator god Brahmā, and Brahmā directly continues Vedic Prajāpati, whom TB 2.3.10 mentions as the father of Sītā Sāvitrī. On the other hand, as noted above, the plow and the field plowed (or the furrow) form a couple, so that Prajāpati is also Sītā Sāvitrī’s husband through incest. In the_
R, a plow-god seems to be both Sītā's father (Janaka) and husband (Rāma = Bala-Rāma).

**KINGS JANAKA AND ĀŚVAPATI**

But in the *R*, Janaka is the king of Mithilā and not a god; the above quoted passages clearly belong to a late layer (cf. Brockington 1998: 379ff.) and do not reflect Vālmiki's Sītā, but the popular conceptions current at that time (cf. Bulcke 1952). Even so, the king was responsible for the fertility and welfare of his country and represented a god, a specific god in each country. King Janaka of Videha, who is often mentioned in Middle Vedic texts, may or may not be identical with the *R*'s Janaka. The Purāṇas know a Janaka dynasty that ruled in Mithilā-Videha after the *MBh* war but before the Buddha (Horsch 1966: 382, 386f.). Janaka's Videha was no longer an independent kingdom by the sixth century B.C. (Brockington 1998: 421). In *SB* 10,6,1,1 and *ChU* 7,11, King Janaka of Videha is mentioned along with Āśvapati, the king of Kekaya. This suggests a connection, since Sāvitrī's father Āśvapati is the king of Madra, and the Madra and the Kekaya or Kaikaya peoples are often mentioned together in the epic, and the Madra king Śāya had Goddess Sītā in his banner.

Rāma's brother Bharata brings to his father Daśaratha, the king of Kosala, enormous dogs as presents from Daśaratha's brother-in-law, Āśvapati, the king of the Kekayas. The dogs had been grown in the palace, equalled the tiger in strength and fought with their teeth (*R* 2,64,21 *antahpura* 'tisamyudhān vyāghraviryabala-lāṅvitān / damśtrāyudhān maḥākāyān śunaś copāyanam dādau). The Greek authors report a gift of similar dogs to Alexander from King Sopheithēs:

Writers narrate also of the excellent qualities of the dogs in the country of Sopheithēs. They say, at any rate, that Alexander received one hundred and fifty dogs from Sopheithēs; and that, to prove them, two were let loose to attack a lion, and, when they were being overpowered, two others were let loose upon him, and that then, the match having now become equal, Sopheithēs bade someone to take one of the dogs by the leg and pull him away, and if the dog did not yield to cut off his leg; and that Alexander would not consent to cutting off the dog's leg at first, but consented when Sopheithēs said that he would give him four instead; and that the dog suffered the cutting off of the leg by slow amputation before he let go his grip. (Strabo 15,1,31 p. 700, trans. Jones 1931: II, 55, Loeb ed.)

Lassen (1847: I, 300; 1852: II, 161) identified the Greek name Sopheithēς with Sanskrit Āśvapati (and Prakrit *Assapati*) and concluded that, like *Poros [= Sanskrit Paurava]* and Taxīḷēś, it was the inherited royal title of the Kekaya king rather than his proper name. Quintus Curtius Rufus (8,12,4) explicitly states that Taxiles was a hereditary title of the kings of Taxila [= Sanskrit Takṣaśīlā-]: sumpst... more gentis suae nomen quod patris fuerat; Taxilen appellaverepopolares,sequente nomine imperium in quaecumque transiret.

-peonithēς most probably renders Indo-Aryan -pati-h, transformed by contamination with similarly sounding Greek or Macedonian names, such as Peithōn, one of Alexander's generals. Sō- for Sanskrit aśva- or Prakrit assa- 'horse' is more difficult to explain. Sylvain Lévi derives Sōpeithēς from the unattested Sanskrit word *Saubhāti* 'king of Saubhāta' (cf. Gañap. on Pāṇ. 4,2,75) (cf. Karttunen 1998: 35, 53). Because this king is associated with dogs in both Greek and Sanskrit sources, the first part Sō- of Sōpeithēς could rather render Gāndhārī *so-* (cf. Hinüber 1986: 78 Gāndhāri monasos = Sanskrit mānasos) for Pāli sā- 'dog' (in a compound: sā-cākka-) from Sanskrit śvā (sg. nom.), śvan- 'dog'; cf. also Pāli so-pāka = Sanskrit śva-pāka- 'dog-cooker', 'dog-eater'. Sva-pati 'Lord of the dogs' is known from VS 16,28 as an epithet of Rudra, the Vedic god of hunters and robbers. In Sanskrit, śva-pati can after -o / -e in sandhi be interpreted as aśvapati. Both meanings, however, make sense: Prajāpati, whom Aśvapati represents, is the lord of the horse, especially the sacrificial horse; and both the horse and the dog are connected with Rudra / Bhairava and related folk deities, for example in Maharashtra (Sontheimer 1989).

**MĪNĀKŚI OF MADURAI**

Queen Pandaiē of Megasthenes has been compared with the guardian Goddess of the Pāṇḍya capital Madurai, Mīnākśi. In the local Tiruvilaiyāṭar-Purāṇam (shorter version from the twelfth, longer from the sixteenth century), she is the daughter of a Pāṇḍya king of Madurai and his queen, who was the daughter of a Coḷa king called Śūrasena. Childless, they performed a Vedic sacrifice to obtain a son, but received from the sacrificial fire a girl. (The birth of Princess Sāvitrī to King Āśvapati in the Indus Valley was similar.) The girl had three breasts, and a voice from heaven told that she should be educated in military arts like a prince, and that she would conquer the whole world. The third breast would disappear when she met her future husband. All this happened, and finally when fighting at Mount Kailāṣa, she met God Śiva and the third breast disappeared. After their marriage, Śiva ruled Madurai as King Sundara-Pāṇḍyan.
Here the spouse of Minākṣi is called Sundaresvaran "Beautiful Lord" and considered to be Śiva. However, there is in Madurai a local form of Viṣṇu called in Tamil Aḻakar 'Beautiful Lord'. Aḻakar is the brother of Minākṣi, who gives the bride away to the groom. The Aḻakarmalai temple with a standing form of Viṣṇu dates to pre-Pallavan times, and is one of the oldest in Tamil Nadu (Champakalakshmi 1981: 50). Especially in a city called Madhurā, Aḻakar could have been both the brother and the husband of the Goddess in ancient times, as was the case with Rāma and Sītā according to the Dasaratha-Jātaka. Both Sundara and Aḻakar might render Sanskrit rāma, which in classical Sanskrit means 'pleasing, charming, handsome, lovely, beautiful'. Iconographic manuals prescribe that Rāma is to be depicted as beautiful (sundara), others that both Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are to be exceedingly handsome (ātiva rūpasampānnau) (Ramachandra Rao 1992: VI, 26, 28). According to BhP 10,2,13, Bala-Rāma was called Rāma because he charmed people (with his beauty) (rāmeti lokaramanād).

Vijaya's Sri Lankan yakkinī wife Kuveṇi or Kuvaṇṇā likewise had three breasts, and she had also been told that one of them would vanish when she saw her future husband, which happened when she saw Vijaya (Shulman 1980: 204f., quoting Davy 1821: 293–95). As Shulman has pointed out, the Tamil word kan included in Minākṣi's vernacular name Aṅ-kaṣar-kaṇṭ-grandmaiyār 'Lady of the beautiful carp-eyes', means both 'eye' and 'breast-nipple'. In the Śrīvidyārṇava-Tantra, Sītā is three-eyed and wears the crescent of the moon on her head; she has four arms holding a noose, a goad, a bow, and an arrow (Ramachandra Rao 1992: VI, 269). Sītā Śāvitrī is an aspect of the warrior goddess Durgā, as is sometimes made explicit in texts (see Parpola 1992, 1998, 1999). In the case of Minākṣi, this relationship with Durgā is clear from her local legend. This legend must be old, for in the Mahābhārata the daughter of King Paṇḍu of Southern Madhurā is called Vijayā, which designates her as the Goddess of Victory.

The legend of a three-breasted princess recurs even at Nāgapaṭṭinam in Tamil Nadu: here this 'Lady of the long dark eyes' (Karuṇa-taṇḍa-kaṇṭi) is the daughter of Aḍi-Śeṣa, King of the snakes, an ardent worshipper of Śiva. Of her, too, it was prophesied that the third breast would disappear as soon as she saw the king who would wed her, in some variants a Nāgarāja (cf. Shulman 1980: 205). Shulman (1980: 200–211) has discussed her relationship with Minākṣi and with Kaṇṭakī, the heroine of Cīlappattikāram who destroys the city of Madurai with one of her breasts, all multiforms of the three-eyed warrior goddess Durgā-Kālī. At Madurai, too, the bride-groom appears to have been the local Śiva-related snake god, called in Tamil Āḷa-vāy (Sanskrit Hālāśya) (cf. Shulman 1980: 123ff., 206).

**Bala-Rāma has replaced Rudra-Śiva**

Bala-Rāma incarnates a snake deity connected with fertility and the subterranean regions, called Śeṣa 'remainder' (the name seems to refer to the seed grain left over for next sowing) or Ananta 'endless'. Serpent Śeṣa drinks palm-wine, and has the palm leaf palm (Sanskrit tala, a loanword from Dravidian) and the wine cup as his iconographic attributes. In this regard he is like Bala-Rāma, who in turn has the three-bend (tri-bhanḍa) pose associated with snake deities (cf. Ramachandra Rao 1991: IV, 121–25). Buddhist Sanskrit texts know Pāṇḍuka, Pāṇḍuraka, Pāṇḍulaka, and Pāṇḍaraka as names of a nāga king, one of the guardians of the great treasures.

The Mathurā region is considered to be the "stronghold of Saṅkarṣaṇa-Baladeva worship" (Jaiswal 1981: 60). The identity of Bala-Rāma is likely to have been pasted onto the earlier local divinity there. The myth of Kṛṣṇa's subduing the snake Kāliya living in the Yamunā river and driving him away from his home has been explained to symbolize the replacement of a snake cult earlier prevalent at Mathurā with the cult of Kṛṣṇa. The excavations at Sonkh have confirmed that snake worship still prevailed to a remarkable degree at Mathurā around the beginning of the Christian era. The only major shrine discovered is an apsidal Nāga temple. The associated finds comprise images and panels representing serpent deities and inscriptions referring to their cult. Nāga, Nāga Bhūmo, and Nāgarāja DadhiKarṇa are mentioned by name (cf. Härtel 1993: 413–60).

Although Saṅkarṣaṇa appears as a Vaiṣṇavite divinity in the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas, there are traces of his close connection with the cult of Rudra-Śiva also. The Paṇcarātra Saṃhitās often identify Saṅkarṣaṇa with Rudra-Śiva. The Brahmanda Purāṇa states that Rudra was known as Hālāyudha. The Viṣṇu Purāṇa speaks of Saṅkarṣaṇa-Rudra, who comes out of the mouth of the serpent Śeṣa at the end of every aeon . . . Śiva also is intimately associated with the nāgas. (Jaiswal 1981: 54)

In Bengal Śiva is worshipped as Lāṅgaleśvara (cf. Smith 1999), and the most important phallic god of Hinduism could really be expected to be the god of plowing and generation. Megasthenes' account of the worship of Dionysos in India underlines Śiva's connection with agriculture and the plow c. 300 B.C.:
The Indians, he [Megasthenes] says, were originally nomads...until Dionysus reached India. But when he arrived and became master of India, he founded cities, gave them laws, bestowed wine on the Indians as on the Greeks, and taught them to sow their land, giving them seed. (Dionysus first yoked oxen to the plough and made most of the Indians agriculturalists instead of nomads, and equipped them also with the arms of warfare... (Arrian, *Indica* 7, 2–7, trans. Brunt 1983: 325–27)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I offer the following provisional reconstruction as a first approximation of the historical background that led to the creation of the earliest versions of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This is of course open to improvement and modification in the light of other evidence.

From 800 B.C. onwards, groups of Iranian-speaking, pastoralist and marauding horsemen started arriving from the steppes of Eurasia and Central Asia in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Their main route to South Asia seems to have been via the Indus Valley to Gujarat, Rajasthan, and northern Maharashtra. These Iranians brought with them their own traditions, such as polyandric marriage, circular yurt-like houses, and funeral customs including exposure and megalithic burial. The newcomers were so fair-skinned that the local population called them ‘pale’ (*pāṇḍu*), using a word taken over from Dravidian languages still spoken in these regions besides Indo-Aryan. While they adopted the local Black-and-Red Ware pottery, the invaders essentially continued living as before in Central India and the Deccan, spreading also further south and adopting there the local Dravidian speech. Around 600 B.C., some megalithic raiders became maritime in Gujarat and colonized the coasts of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu.

Meanwhile some megalithic Pāṇḍus turned towards the culturally more advanced northern India. Through marital and other alliances they eventually gathered such a force that one group, the Pāṇḍavas, took over the rule even in the mightiest kingdom of north India. Another successful group was the family to which the Buddha belonged: the Śākyas, too, were Pāṇḍus, ultimately of Śaka origin, as their name reveals. In north India, the Pāṇḍus quickly adopted the earlier local culture and language. Their newly won positions were legitimated with fabricated genealogies that made them a branch of the earlier ruling family, and with the performance of royal rituals. The propaganda was disseminated by professional bards, leading to the creation of the *Mahābhārata*.

The alliance of the Pāṇḍavas and the Yādava chief Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva during the *Mahābhārata* wars led to the birth of a new Vaiṣṇava religion, at the center of which was at first a trio that succeeded another with Vedic and older Indo-European roots (the Aśvins and their sister); two heroic brothers (the ‘strong’ white elder brother Arjuna / Baladeva and the black younger brother Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva) and their sister, whom the elder brother marries. This trio amalgamates the earlier cult of another trio worshipped from the upper Indus Valley (Madra, Kekaya, Bāhlīka) through Gujarat (Pra- bhāsa) and Rajasthan (Puṣkara, Mālavā) to Prayāga at the confluence of Yamunā and Gangā and eastwards up to Gayā (cf. Parpola 1998: 217ff.), evidently including Mathurā.

The earlier trio thus absorbed into Vaiṣṇavism consisted of the incestuous couple of father (Prajāpati = Brahmā = Janaka = Aśvapati) and daughter (Vāc = Uṣas = Śāvitrī = Sītā = Vijayā = Durgā) and the dying and resurrected young prince-husband (Satyavat = Kumāra = Rudra = Śiva) to whom the father married off his daughter (an alter ego of the father). These agricultural divinities were represented by the king and the queen and by such fertility symbols as the plow and furrow, pestle and mortar, and snake and earth. In a recurring new year festival, a young hero (representing the king and the dying sun, etc.) was sacrificed after his “sacred marriage” with the queen; wine-drinking, feasting with the meat of sacrificial victims, singing, dancing, and sexual orgies were essential elements of this festival (cf. *MBh* 8 and Parpola 1998).

As a result of the amalgamation, Arjuna / Baladeva was transformed into (Bala-)Rāma and his wife-sister into Sītā. Around 450 B.C. the new Vaiṣṇava religion was taken from Mathurā via Dvārakā by sea to Sri Lanka (by Paṇḍu-Vāsudeva) and to Tamil Nadu (where southern Madhurā became the new Pāṇḍya capital). Rumors about the princess held captive in the royal palace of Sri Lanka (*Mhv* ch. 9) reached Ayodhyā soon hereafter, and Vālmiki composed his epic in which the local royalties played the roles of Janaka (the father of Sītā), (Bala)Rāma, and Sītā, and Rāma’s younger brother (Lakṣmaṇa thus replacing Kṛṣṇa of the early Vaiṣṇava trio).
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DED = Burrow and Emeneau 1984.


Parpola: On the Historical Background of the Sanskrit Epics


