

Chronicle and Epic, or the Introductions to the Mahāvamsa and the Mahābhārata: Selected Comparisons

NICHOLAS J. ALLEN

Wolfson College, Oxford, United Kingdom

Abstract: The *Mahāvamsa*, composed in Pali verse around AD 500, has sometimes been called the ‘Great Chronicle of Ceylon’. It summarises the origins of Buddhism in North India and the spread of the religion to Sri Lanka, where it flourished. The *Mahābhārata*, India’s ‘Great Epic’, was reaching its current written form at the start of our era, and is a foundational document in the Hindu tradition. Nevertheless, if the two texts are examined closely, they show surprising and extensive similarities. The present paper, which condenses a much longer study, tries to demonstrate this claim by selecting similarities from the introductory section of each work. The similarities are of many types – for instance, of form as well as content, and call for historical explanation. Possible explanations are various, and need not be confined to interactions within South Asia; though the idea is not explored here, the similarities may have arisen before the Indo-European languages reached India.

Keywords: *Mahāvamsa*, *Mahābhārata*, Indo-European mythology.

Despite having some other research interests, when I am asked what I do, I nowadays often introduce myself as trying to practise ‘Indo-European Cultural Comparativism’. In the first place this means following in the tradition of Georges Dumézil (1898-1986), but I try to go beyond him in several ways. For instance, though it will not be relevant here, I believe that his trifunctional theory of IE ideology needs (with slight modification) to be subsumed within a more elaborate pentadic model. More relevant here is another way of building on the great French comparativist. I take seriously what he hinted at here and there – namely that we should attribute to the early Indo-Europeans, not merely a reconstructable ideology, but also one (or more) reconstructable ‘proto-narratives’. In other words, I hypothesise a substantial body of oral narrative expressed in an early IE language and ancestral to IE oral epic traditions.

To adopt this point of view is to reject two widespread assumptions. It is often assumed that language change (change in grammar and lexicon) is generally far slower than change in narratives; but we do not *know* this, and I doubt that it is always and everywhere true. Secondly, it is often thought that Indian epic originated in India, and Homeric epic in Greece; but again, we do not *know* this. The similarities between the two suggest rather that they descend independently from a common origin; and Roman pseudohistory can probably be added to the

two epic traditions. The lack of clear evidence for anything like the *Mahābhārata* during the Vedic period does not prove that it did not exist – following various hints in Dumézil’s work, one can reasonably talk of the ‘Vedic bypass’. It is with this comparativist orientation that I approach the two texts mentioned in my title.

The *Mahāvamsa*, the Great Chronicle of Ceylon, as it is sometimes called, was written down around AD 500 in the Sanskrit-derived language Pali. I have used the text as edited by Geiger in 1908 and translated into English by him and Mabel Bode in 1912. For the *Mahābhārata* I have used the Critical Edition and the translations of Van Buitenen and John Smith. The secondary literature devoted to one or other of the two texts will seldom be used here, though naturally one can find stray remarks that compare the two genres in question (for instance, in Scheible 2016).

Of the more detailed comparisons, I ought to mention at least the first English translation of the Chronicle, by George Turnour in 1837, which relates one story in the *Mahāvamsa* to Greek epic. Vijaya is presented in the Chronicle as leader of the first human beings who lived on the island (which, following the Pali, I call Laṅkā). What Turnour showed was that Vijaya’s encounter with the *yakṣī* Kuvaṇṇa (or Kuveṇa) closely resembles that of Odysseus with Circe. The parallel is persuasive, and has been accepted by many classicists, for instance Denys Page (1973: 62-65).¹ However, my interest in the Pali text was sparked less by these comparisons than by the anthropologically-oriented historian Alan Strathern (2014). Interested in the nature of kingship, Strathern’s comparisons include that of Vijaya, first king of Laṅkā, with Romulus, first king of Rome; but his approach favours typology rather than common origin.

As regards comparative method, I prefer to exhibit it in action, rather than theorising about it in the abstract. But here are two points. I look for *all kinds* of similarities, not only those of narrative (details and structures), but also those of textual organisation and even diction. Of course, a full-scale comparison must take account of differences – which can always be found – but it is the similarities that have priority: provided they are close enough to be persuasive, it is they alone that justify an undertaking conceived within a language family framework.

In addition, ‘similarities’ usually exist in respect of some particular feature, and typically in some particular narrative context. Thus agent A in one text may parallel agent B in the other in one respect and context, but may parallel agent C in another respect and context, and perhaps agent D otherwise and elsewhere. One-to-one comparisons are simple to grasp, and welcome as such, but the real situation is often far more complicated.

For convenience of reference I give the comparisons a number and title, often putting several individual rapprochements under a single title. The body of the paper presents only selected comparisons; and it does so without trying to explain them. The problem of explanation is alluded to at the end, but only programmatically.

¹ Curiously, without referring to Turnour, a well-known contemporary student of the Epic, Alf Hiltebeitel (1990: Ch.7), compares the same section of the Pali to two other passages in the Sanskrit Epic and one in early Irish.

1. Introduction versus Main Story

My first two comparisons concern the organisation of our two texts. It is commonplace for a narrative to distinguish an introduction from a main story, and it is not unusual for the introduction to explain how the main story came to be composed and/or recorded – events that normally take place after the events of the main story. Both these features are prominent in our texts. A listener or reader easily senses the distinction, even though neither of the original texts provides a label that could be translated ‘introduction’.

In its Ch. 1 the Introduction to the Chronicle introduces the Buddha and recounts his three visits to Laṅkā, at a time when the island was inhabited only by *yakṣa* or *nāga* spirits. The next four chapters concern the history of Buddhism in North India, down to Asoka (Sk *Aśoka*) and the third Buddhist Council, which was held during his reign. Only then do we start on the main story. The Main Story begins in North India, but its opening chapter recounts the antecedents of Vijaya, who gives his name to Ch. 6, ‘The Coming of Vijaya’ (*Vijayāgamana*). As we noted, it is he who first colonises the island, which he reaches on the day the Buddha dies (6.47). So the Introduction ends with the reign of Asoka, while the main story starts with Vijaya’s great-grandparents – several generations before the death of the Buddha. In other words, the transition is marked by a substantial step back in narrative time.

The Introduction to the Great Epic presents a minor problem of definition, since its precise end is debatable.² In any case, apart from its summary of the Epic’s contents, the Introduction is dominated by the two frame stories – Outer and Inner – which explain how the text originated. It climaxes at the end of the Inner Frame story, which describes the Snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya. It was at this ritual that the Epic, composed by Vyāsa, was first publicly recited, by Vyāsa’s pupil Vaiśampāyana. But Janamejaya belongs three generations after Arjuna, and once the Main Story gets started in 1,57.1, it at once takes us back to King Vasu Uparicara, four generations before Arjuna. Again we find a substantial step back in time.

2. Five Textual Units, the Last Being Longest

Though the Chronicle as a whole consists of thirty-seven chapters, the Introduction only has five, and of these five the fifth, focusing on Asoka, is by far the longest: it is as long as all its predecessors put together. Comparison with the *Mahābhārata* needs to take account less of chapters (*adhyāyas*) than of a level of organisation not represented overtly in the Pali. Not only is the Epic divided into the eighteen Major Books, but these books are subdivided into about a hundred Minor Books, the Upaparvans. Book 1 as a whole contains sixteen Upaparvans, and the Introduction contains five of them. But of these the fifth, the *Āstīkaparvan*, is by far the longest. In terms of chapters, it contains more than three times as many

² The choice lies between 1,53.26 or 36, and 1,56.33). In terms of subject matter, the last is best; everything preceding it is introductory, and some ancient narrators began at that point (1,1.50). (The comma separates book number from chapter, but since the whole of this paper is focused on Book 1, I often omit the book number.)

as all its predecessors put together, but some of the chapters are unusually long. Viewed simply in terms of length, the *Āstikaparvan* is substantially longer than everything that precedes it.

3. Bow, Promise, Characterisation

Both introductions open with bowing. The Pali narrator begins as follows: ‘Having made obeisance to the Saṃbuddha, ...I will recite the *Mahāvamśa*’ (1.1). This first-person undertaking is the only reference to the narrator. The first words of the Epic are: ‘Honour first Nārāyaṇa, and Nara, the most excellent of men; honour too Sarasvatī the goddess; then proclaim the Tale of Victory’ (trans. Smith).³ So both texts start with the honorific action in the gerund: Pali *namassituṇāna* (the first word) corresponds to Sanskrit *namaskṛtya* (the second word); and in both the main clause consists of a verb of speaking and a name for the whole text. The title *Mahāvamśa* parallels *Jaya* (literally ‘Victory’; it is used as another name for the whole Epic in 56.19). Another formulation of what the bard will be doing is that he will proclaim ‘the entire thought of Vyāsa’ (e.g. 1.23).

The text that is about to be narrated is then praised. The *Mahāvamśa* claims to be an improvement on earlier accounts (which include the less polished Chronicle now called the *Dīpavamśa*); it will arouse serene joy and emotion (*saṃvega* and *pasāda* – 1.2-4)⁴. The *Mahābhārata* is praised at much greater length – too great to be detailed here. Nor shall I collect the various exhortations, addressed to the audience of both texts, to listen and enjoy.

4. Journeys: the Buddha to Laṅkā, Garuḍa to Heaven

As already mentioned, the Buddha makes three visits to Laṅkā, which are clearly presented as a coherent triad: I Visit to Mahiyaṅgaṇa, II to Nāgadīpa, III to Kalyāṇī; the respective areas are roughly in the South-East, North-West and South-West. The island is not yet inhabited by human beings, but the Buddha knows that Buddhism will later flourish there, and the visits are a preparation for that future development (1.19-20, 7.4).

The *Āstikaparvan* tells a complicated story of which at this point we need to mention only a single strand (quite a substantial one, more than a quarter of the whole). The sage Kaśyapa has as cowives two egg-laying sisters. The elder, Kadrū, produces as sons a thousand snakes, while the younger, Vinatā, has two sons, of whom only the younger, the bird Garuḍa, remains with his mother. The sisters agree to a wager, which the elder wins by cheating. The result is that Vinatā and Garuḍa become slaves to Kadrū and her brood. This situation will terminate if Garuḍa brings the snakes the elixir (*amṛta* or *soma*), which is currently owned and guarded by the gods. So Garuḍa sets off for heaven.

Both travellers – the Buddha and Garuḍa – are working towards some sort of release. The religion for which the Buddha’s triple journey is preparing the way

³ The CE does not give the stanza a number, treating this benedictory opening as a sort of epigraph. It is sometimes referred to as 1.1.0.

⁴ Or ‘anxious thrill and serene satisfaction’ (Scheible).

will help future generations to achieve release from the *dukkha* of ordinary life, while Garuḍa's journey is initially undertaken to release from slavery himself and his mother (though it will also have other results). This may seem too abstract to amount to a worthwhile rapprochement, but other aspects of the journey justify the comparison.

One of these is mode of travel. Though it is not stated in so many words, it is clear enough that the Buddha travels through the air: nothing suggests either the slow and laborious overland journey or a voyage such as (later in the text) is attributed to Vijaya (and others). Moreover, when the Buddha arrives at his destination, he is described as hovering in the air above the *yakṣas* or *nāgas* (Visits I and II), and only subsequently alighting. Garuḍa, 'the greatest of birds', is often described as flying. We can sum up: the Buddha parallels Garuḍa (travel by air).

5. Large versus Small

I start with Visit II since it offers the clearest comparisons. It occurs in the fifth year after the Buddha's enlightenment, and is motivated by his becoming aware of an impending war between two groups of *nāgas*, both of whom claim a valuable throne. One group is led by Mahodara, whose realm is in the ocean, the other by his nephew Cūlodara, who reigns in the mountains. The uncle is trying to reclaim what had originally been a gift and therefore seems to be in the wrong. In any case, a striking feature is their names, which mean respectively 'Big-Belly' and 'Small-Belly'.

In the course of Garuḍa's journey two chapters (1,26-7) are dominated by a quarrel between parties who are respectively big and small. At one point Garuḍa finds himself carrying the branch of a banyan tree, from which some seers called Vālakhilyas are hanging. The seers are carefully released, and when the branch is dropped, portents occur in heaven. Explanations are given of the portents and their cause. The Vālakhilyas helped bring about the birth of Garuḍa, who is on his way to steal the soma, and their hostility to Indra is the god's own fault. When Kaśyapa held a sacrifice with a view to having a son, he asked supernaturals to collect firewood. The massive Indra brought an enormous load, while the tiny Vālakhilyas (who were the size of the distal phalanx of the thumb), were struggling as a group to carry a single leaf. Irritated by Indra's mockery of their puny efforts, the seers undertake their own sacrifice, intending to produce another and superior Indra – i.e., Garuḍa. A compromise acceptable to both sides is suggested by Kaśyapa: the old Indra will retain his position and the younger one will be the Indra of birds.

To summarise so far, Big-Belly parallels Indra, Small-Belly parallels the Vālakhilyas. But the comparison goes further. In both cases the quarrelling parties are reconciled by an outsider. The Buddha reconciles the two *nāga* groups, Kaśyapa (identified with Prajāpati – 27.5, 16) reconciles Indra and the Vālakhilyas; and in both cases it is the 'large' figure, Mahodara or Indra, who has initiated the quarrel with the small figure.

6. The Battle

The two *nāga* groups are drawn up ready to fight, or may already have started. Hovering above them, the Buddha, here called Jina (the Vanquisher or Victor), draws their attention by causing a frightening darkness. When he dispels it, the warring parties listen submissively and gladly to his irenic sermon, and surrender the throne to him.

In the light of the portents the gods arm themselves to guard the soma. When the battle opens (in 1,28), Garuḍa raises a large dust storm, which darkens the worlds and hides him from sight. The dust is dispersed by the Wind God and the darkness lifts. Hanging in the sky above the gods, Garuḍa spreads terror, puts them to flight, and searches for the elixir. Penetrating a metallic device, he uses dust to blind and defeat two large snakes guarding the precious fluid, which he can now remove.⁵ He has an amiable encounter with Nārāyaṇa (Krishna), and eventually comes to an agreement with Indra.

The account of the battle in heaven is far longer and more complex than the one in Laṅkā, and the Epic traveller, Garuḍa, is actively involved in violence such as the Buddha would never commit.⁶ Nevertheless, the following similarities can be noted: arrival of an outsider at place where a battle is to be fought; all or some of those who fight are *nāgas*; temporary use by the outsider of darkness, which induces fear; ultimate reconciliation of the warring parties. The Buddha leaves behind him, as sacred memorials of Visit II, not only the throne, but also the tree that was brought with him from North India (and no doubt foreshadows the part of the Bodhi tree transported to Laṅkā in *Mhv* 18-19). Garuḍa's visit too has some enduring after-effects, including the presence of the bird on Vishnu's standard.

At first sight a battle between two groups of *nāgas* seems very different from a battle between the consortium of gods and *nāgas* who guard the elixir, but the difference is mitigated by two details. The portents signalling the approach of Garuḍa include a phenomenon that is described as unprecedented: the weapons proper to the different groups of gods begin attacking one another (26.29-30, cf. 28.2). These epic allusions to conflict among the gods recall the internecine conflict of the *nāgas* in the Chronicle. Moreover, both conflicts show a certain ambiguity in their outcome. Neither of the *nāga* groups can claim victory over the other, and although Garuḍa defeats the gods and takes the elixir, his aim is only to gain freedom. Thereafter he is perfectly happy to let Indra recuperate it.

Visit I of the Buddha has several features in common with Visit II, for instance his use of frightening darkness to attract attention; and his descent from the air to sit on his rug during Visit I recalls his descent to sit on the throne in Visit II. But rather than elaborating on the Pali-Pali similarities, I note a parallel of sorts between Visit I and the Epic. The Buddha's rug is surrounded by flames, whose heat disperses the *yakṣas* (1.29); and by a miracle the spirits are then transported to a distance. When Garuḍa has vanquished the gods, he 'sees fire everywhere', and has to extinguish it by a miracle before proceeding. It is easy to find differences,

⁵ The two guardian snakes resemble the snakes Mahodara and Culodara in being paired, but differ from them in being neither differentiated nor opposed to each other.

⁶ However, in 1.58, the Buddha is described as *tamonuda* 'one who expels *tamas*', i.e. spiritual darkness: if he uses violence, it is in a religious sense.

but close to the end-point of the journey both stories combine the motifs of fire and a miracle.

7. Gatherings

I skip *Mhv* 2, which is devoted to the Buddha's genealogy, and turn directly to *Mhv* 3-5 which – chapter by chapter – present the three Buddhist Councils. The first takes place in Rājagaha a few months after the Buddha's death (or *parinirvāṇa*), in the reign of King Ajātasattu, son of Bimbisāra. The second is held a century later during the reign of King Kālāsoka (4.8), and the third 118 years later still, under Asoka (5.21). I should recall at this point that the aim here is to present similarities between the two Introductions, not to analyse the historicity of the Councils. The three councils are clearly presented as a triad and, like the three Visits to Laṅkā, provide plenty of material for Pali-Pali comparison.

In the *Āstikaparvan* the only two kings to be presented at any length are Parikṣit and Janamejaya. *Mhv* 3 starts by mentioning a gathering at the time of the Buddha's death. It was certainly vast, for it included innumerable monks, all four estates of Indian society, and the gods (3.3). The passage could imply a gathering immediately after the death, but we read later (7.2), that when the Buddha was on the bed of his *nirvāṇa*, he was 'in the midst of the great assembly of gods' – it is with them that he leaves instructions about Vijaya's visit to Laṅkā. It seems unnecessary to distinguish two gatherings associated with the death that causes the holding of Council I.

The *Āstikaparvan* includes several gatherings, for instance those of the gods and demons at the Churning of the Ocean, or that of the gods to fight Garuḍa, but the ones worth comparing with the Councils are the two that punctuate its conclusion and are associated respectively with Parikṣit and Janamejaya. The story of Parikṣit (Arjuna's grandson) begins when he meets an ascetic whom he humiliates, and whose son accordingly issues a fierce curse: the king will be killed within a week by the snake Takṣaka. The king is warned and tries to defend himself. He builds a special platform or 'tree-house' and surrounds it with protection – doctors, herbs, magician-brahmins – not to mention his councillors, ministers, and friends (38.28-30, cf. 39.27); the assembled humans clearly constitute a gathering. But Takṣaka tricks the king and kills him just as the seven days are ending.

Janamejaya succeeds at a young age, but when old enough he asks to hear about his father's death. He at once decides to punish snakes in general and Takṣaka in particular. The Snake Sacrifice is a large-scale ritual, 'attended by multitudes of brahmins' (47.11); the four Vedic *ṛtvij* officiants are named, as are the seventeen *sadasyas* or concelebrants – but many others are also present.

Despite the emphasis on priests, both these two Epic gatherings centre on the kings who organise them. But one further gathering needs mention, even though it may seem heterogeneous. The *satra* or Session that provides the setting for the Outer Frame story is the first event mentioned in the epic. Strictly speaking,⁷ a Vedic *sattra* is a large soma sacrifice lasting at least twelve days and

⁷ Both the priests and Janamejaya refer to the Snake Sacrifice as a *satra* (47.6, 9), but the event does not accord with the Vedic definition of that type of ritual.

often much more (the gathering in 1.1 is referred to as a ‘twelve-year Session’). It is organised and performed by the many brahmins who officiate. The Epic is vague on the size of the Bard’s audience, but the hermits who live in the Naimiṣa Forest are said to crowd round him to hear his stories (1.3). This gathering is interesting in that the ritual is purely for religious specialists: no kings participate. Similarly, in the Pali, whatever assistance kings may provide, the Buddhist councils are for monks alone, and in this respect they resemble a Session. The similarity between participants is more cogent than the numerical match between the three Buddhist Councils and the three gatherings that can be assembled from the Epic. But in any case, there is much more to be said about the gatherings.

8. Death and Recitation

At first sight it may seem ridiculous to compare the death of the Buddha with that of Parikṣit. The Buddha is many things, but above all he is a teacher and the founder of a world religion. Parikṣit does receive a good deal of praise (45.5-12): for instance, he was like Dharma incarnate; he was guardian to goddess earth and friend to all the world. However, he is not presented either as a teacher or a founder; moreover, we shall shortly encounter a better epic parallel for Buddha as religious teacher. But my point here is that each death is linked to an important recitation. According to the *Mahāvamsa* the Buddha’s death leads on directly to the establishment of the Buddhist canon. Council I, which lasts seven months, is presided over by the Buddha’s disciple Mahākassapa, who puts his questions to two of the other disciples. He asks Upāli to expound the Vinaya, which the other monks repeat after him. Then it is the turn of Ānanda, who expounds the *dhamma*, in its entirety (*asesato* 3.35), which the monks again repeat; this will cover the *Suttapiṭaka*. Of course, what the two disciples expound is what the Buddha taught, at different times and places, and is presented as the first consolidated version of what were to become the canonical scriptures. It is said that Council II accepted the *dhamma* as already established, including the third *piṭaka*, the *Abhidhamma* (4.62-64); and Council III apparently did the same (5.275-6).

As we noted in Comparison 1, it is at the Snake Sacrifice that the first real performance is given of the *Mahābhārata*. Vyāsa composed it over the course of three years (56.32), and taught it to Vaiśampāyana; and the latter recited it during the pauses in the sacrifice. The interval between the Buddha’s death and the recitation of the *dhamma* is a matter of months, that between the death of Parikṣit and the recitation of the Epic is a matter of years, but both reciters perform at a gathering held in direct response to the death. In each case the reciter is a pupil of the originator of the tradition (and not for instance his son); and in neither does the reciter speak without interruption. Just as Upāli recites in response to questioning by Mahākassapa, so Vaiśampāyana is prompted or urged on by *sadasyas* (he is again and again *codyamāno* – 1.58).

This last point implies three rapprochements, bearing on the questioners, the reciters and the originators of the traditions. The last is the most interesting: the Buddha, originator of the *dhamma*, parallels Vyāsa, originator of the Great Epic. So far, we have emphasised the *dhamma* and Epic as texts which are first publicly recited at gatherings arising from a prominent death. But they are of

course much more than texts. The words of the Buddha are the basis of a world religion, and the words of Vyāsa are a foundational document in the genesis of classical Hinduism, as distinct from the Vedas; and in both cases the founder participated in the events narrated.

Furthermore, both bodies of teaching are soteriological, the Epic no less than Buddhism. According to the Bard, the Epic is sometimes equated with the Vedas as a means of sanctification (56.15). It was after arranging the Vedas that Vyāsa composed ‘this holy history’ (*itihāsam...puṇyam* 1.52), and (says the bard) ‘a brahmin who knows the four Vedas with their branches and Upanishads but does not know the Epic has no learning at all’ (would not be *vicakṣaṇa* – 2.235). When weighed in a balance against the four Vedas, the Epic (in other texts called the ‘Fifth Veda’ – see Brockington 1998: 5, 7) is the heavier (1.208); it can purify from sins and bring one long life, fame and entrance to heaven (e.g. 1.191, 207). Presumably, if Vyāsa had wished to claim doctrinal innovation, he would have stressed his epic’s emphasis on Krishna (e.g. 1.193-5 – not only in the *Bhagavadgītā*). From this point of view, it may be worth noting that Buddhism is named after its founder, while classical or post-Vedic Hinduism is not named Vyāsa-ism.

9. A Last-minute Arrival

Arrival at the last possible moment is common enough as a narrative device for generating excitement, and it is used quite prominently in our two texts. Once the king has arranged premises for Council I, the question arises of who is to attend. The day before the opening, Ānanda is told by the monks that he cannot participate until he becomes an arahant, and is urged to become one. Making the necessary effort, he succeeds, but decides not to enter the hall along with the 499 other monks, who have left him a seat. His presence is essential, and people are wondering where he is – when he appears miraculously, ‘rising out of the ground or passing through the air’ (3.29).

Parikṣit had been cursed by the ascetic’s son to be killed by Takṣaka within seven nights (37.13-14), and it is on the seventh day that two things happen.⁸ Kāśyapa sets out to save the king from dying of snake-bite by a last-minute intervention, but his plan is not realised. He gives it up following a bribe from Takṣaka, reflecting too that it would be contrary to destiny. Takṣaka then sends snakes, disguised as ascetics, to take the king gifts, including fruit, which is accepted. The snake enters the fruit in the form of a small worm, and as the sun is setting, Parikṣit thinks he is now out of danger; but the snake coils round him, and kills him by poison and fire (38.31-40.4). Despite their contrasting objectives, the monk and snake have in common their use of magic to join the gathering at the last minute.⁹

⁸ Two seven-day periods are mentioned in *Mhv* 3: the first week is for funeral ceremonies, the second for homage to the relics. But seven-day periods are too common for this to be very noteworthy. Similarly, I note, but do not stress, the similarity between the names of Mahākassapa and Kāśyapa (here written with the macron).

⁹ Takṣaka contracts himself to the size of a small worm, only to expand himself once he is in contact with the king. Perhaps compare (within the Sanskrit) Garuḍa contracting himself to pass between the

The motif of arrival just in time is used again at the Snake sacrifice. Takṣaka is just about to fall into the fire when the ritual is interrupted – as we shall see.

10. King's U-turn and Evil Versus Good

Council II is occasioned by the rise of heretical views promulgated by the Vajjis. The Vajjis and the orthodox monks both canvas support. By going to the capital and lying about the cause of the dispute, the heretics win over King Kālāsoka. But the orthodox position is supported by the gods, who send the king a frightening dream, and by the king's sister Nandā, a nun who urges him to change his mind. Listening to both sides, he now approves the orthodox view, which is confirmed at the Council.

An equally decisive reversal of royal policy takes place at the Snake Sacrifice. Janamejaya undertakes his ritual as an act of revenge against Takṣaka and his kinsmen (47.4). He is warned by a master builder that the sacrifice will be interrupted, but at first all goes according to plan. Writhing and screaming, the snakes fall into the fire in vast numbers (47.20-24), but when Takṣaka seeks the support of Indra, he is reassured that he will survive. Āstika obtains access to the king, who is impressed by the youth and wants to grant him a boon. But the king and priests are still angry at having failed to lure Takṣaka into the fire, and only when Indra arrives and drops Takṣaka can the boon be granted. Āstika immediately requests the cessation of the ritual, and hence the survival of Takṣaka. Though reluctant at first, the king eventually gives way, and in fact ends up delighted (1, 50-53).

Though the epic story is far more dramatic, both kings make a political U-turn, and they do so in the context of either the Second Council or the second major gathering and second prominent reign within the Introduction. Janamejaya's initial intention must be to destroy all the snakes, and we can say that both kings receive warnings against their initial attitude. To this extent Kālāsoka parallels Janamejaya. But the ethical aspects of the rapprochement raise a problem. Clearly Kālāsoka starts off in the wrong by favouring the heretics, but it is less clear that Janamejaya is initially in the wrong. To see why he is, we need to take account of the attitude of the gods as expressed earlier in the Upaparvan.

When Kadrū tries to cheat at her wager, her offspring initially disobey her, and she curses them to burn at the Snake Sacrifice (13.35). Although the curse is excessive, Brahmā and the gods do not object, in view of the large number of snakes and their vicious use of poison (18.7c-11, 49.8). However, one of the snakes, Vāsuki, is worried by the curse and Brahmā's ratification of it. Recalling his help at the Churning of the Ocean, the gods persuade Brahmā to free at least him from his mother's curse – subject to the fulfilment of certain conditions (49.9-13). But when the snakes debate their response to the threat hanging over them (1, 33-5) we learn that Brahmā's position is more nuanced than it seemed. While admitting that there are too many snakes, he makes an important distinction (34.10, 35.10): 'the eagerly biting Snakes, the mean and evil and virulent ones, that are doomed to die', are to

spokes of the iron wheel blocking access to the elixir (29.4), only to expand again once he is through it; or in the Pali, the Buddha's expansion and contraction of his rug during Visit I.

be distinguished from the law-abiding ones, that are not. The two classes are respectively sinful (*pāpacārā*) and virtuous (*dharmacāriṇaḥ*). The sinners die before Āstika's intervention, the virtuous survive.

We now see that the Vajji heretics, referred to as *pāpabhikkhū* (5.3), parallel the sinful snakes, while the orthodox monks parallel the virtuous ones. The moral dualism of the snakes/monks is no less important than the political dualism in the king, but the two dualisms are used differently. Kālāsoka changes from favouring the sinners to favouring the orthodox, while Janamejaya changes from enmity towards snakes in general to enmity towards evil snakes. In making this change he resembles Brahmā, who started off by accepting Kadrū's blanket curse and only later discriminated.

11. One Senior Snake Stands Apart

In general, I follow the order of events in the Chronicle rather than in the Epic, but there is no need to make a fetish of this practice. My next rapprochement involves a *nāga* who features in the *Āstikaparvan* (1,32), but can be compared to a *nāga* who interacts with the Buddha during his visits to Laṅkā. We must turn back to *Mhv* 1.

The *nāga* Maṇiakkhika heard the Buddha's preaching during Visit I, and was converted. He was mother's brother to Mahodara, and during Visit II he thanks the Buddha for reconciling the two hostile *nāga* groups and issues an invitation for Visit III. Later repeated, the invitation is taken up by the Buddha in the eighth year of his enlightenment, when the snake proves a good host (1.63, 71, 74; 15.162). He stands apart from the other snakes by his presence at all three visits and by his consistently positive and supportive attitude towards Buddhism.

Of Kadrū's thousand *nāga* sons Śeṣa is the eldest (31.5 – Vāsuki is the second). Observing that he has left his family and is devoting himself to asceticism, Brahmā questions his motives. Śeṣa explains that his stupid and quarrelsome brothers are unbearable to live with, and that they should not be so hostile to Garuḍa. The high god offers a boon, and they agree that the snake is to live under the earth and give it the stability it has hitherto lacked. Brahmā gives Garuḍa to Śeṣa as a helper.¹⁰

So Maṇiakkhika and Śeṣa both stand apart from the other snakes, and both are on good terms with the supreme beings recognised by their respective traditions. In this sense the Buddha parallels Brahmā (the Grandfather). One outcome of Visit III is the footsteps (*pada*) left on Adam's Peak (1.77), and one might wonder if they parallel the chasm or hole (*vivara*) that the earth opens up to allow Śeṣa access to his new home (38.22a). The comparison between these two depressions in the earth may be far-fetched, but I find it difficult to be sure.

¹⁰ What help the bird could give is not explained. Possibly a connection is being made between the subterranean realm of Śeṣa and the aerial realm of Garuḍa.

12. Homonymic parents

Mhv 5 is particularly long and complicated, with its text divided into six sections (of which only the first five have titles). The sections mostly increase in length as we proceed: the numbers of shlokas are respectively 13, 20, 39, 22, 59, and 149. If the 22-shloka section were omitted, the length would increase at every step, and we should again encounter (as in Comparison 2) the structure of five textual units, of which the last is not only the longest, but also longer than the sum of its predecessors.

Many of the possible rapprochements for *Mhv* 5 involve parts of the Epic that lie outside the Introduction, but the similarity I select here lies within the limits of this paper and seems to me particularly striking. We have already discussed the royal U-turn of Kālāsoka at council II, along with its ethical associations, but a comparable phenomenon occurs in connection with Asoka and Council III. Asoka has in fact two epithets. At the start of his reign, owing to his evil deeds (his *pāpena kammunā*), he is called Caṇḍāsoka, Asoka the Wicked or Fierce – which may well allude to the fact that, to gain the throne, he killed his ninety-nine brothers (5.20). Then he is converted to Buddhism, and owing to his pious deeds (*puññaṇa kammunā*) is called Dharmāsoka, Asoka the Pious (5.189). Here, as in the case of Kālāsoka, the king's orientation changes straightforwardly from bad to good; but this time the change arises from his encounter with Nigrodha. Since the corresponding change in Janamejaya (merciless to merciful) is due to his encounter with Āstika, we need to compare these two figures.

Both are emphatically young men, but the most interesting comparison concerns their parentage. Nigrodha's father Sumana, the eldest brother of Asoka, was killed on the latter's orders. However, he left behind his pregnant widow who 'bore the same name as he did' – she was *taṃnāmikā* (5.41). She is in fact Sumanā, with the feminine ending. Sumanā flees to a *caṇḍāla* village, where the guardian god of a *nigrodha* tree (a banyan) welcomes and helps her. That very day she gives birth to her son, whom she names after the tree-god. After seven years he is ordained by a senior monk, and soon comes in contact with the king.

Āstika's father is a brahmin ascetic called Jaratkāru, who insists on marrying a wife with the same name as himself – she must be *sanāmnī* (13.25). His wife is a *nāgī* – in fact the sister of Vāsuki – but she is indeed called Jaratkāru, and so is *sanāmā* to the ascetic (43.1). Once she is pregnant, the father abandons her, but his parting words confirm the pregnancy, as well as the sex of the infant (1,43-4). In emphasising the former, the seer uses the word *asti* 'there is (sc. a growing foetus)', and that is why Āstika is so named. Vāsuki is well aware that his sister's son is destined to interrupt the Snake Sacrifice, and once the ritual has started, he ensures that the youth is despatched on his mission.

Thus both Nigrodha and Āstika have parents whose names are near or total homonyms. Each has a mother whose partner is absent when she gives birth (either because he is dead like Sumana, or for other reasons, like Jaratkāru). Both are given names that arise from the circumstances of their birth. Both arouse warm responses from their kings. Asoka experiences kindly feelings towards Nigrodha (*pema* 5.48, 62), because of his grave deportment and because they lived together in a previous birth (which is narrated). On hearing the youth's hymn of praise for

the sacrifice, Janamejaya feels moved to offer Āstika a boon (51.1). And above all, both are responsible for the U-turns of their kings. We can confidently accept that Nigrodha parallels Āstika.

Concluding Remarks

This completes my selection. Perhaps I should repeat that the similarities presented here are only a sample taken from a longer work in progress. However, I hope the sample suffices to show that there are indeed massive similarities of many sorts between our two texts. I do not think that this sort of comparative work is 'speculative'. It sometimes involves judgements as to whether A is or is not similar to B, but most of the time it is about facts: A is like B in respect of some feature that they share. It is partly to avoid any hint of speculation that I separate the collecting of similarities from the problem of explaining them.

Of course, ultimately, explanation is the really interesting challenge. The similarities are numerous, detailed, and above all, interrelated.¹¹ They are far too rich to be due to chance, or to the independent operation of the human imagination building on archetypes. There must be some sort of historical explanation, and a range of possibilities come to mind. The most obvious perhaps is to suppose that the ancestors of the Sri Lankans felt the need for a Chronicle and developed one by adapting the *Mahābhārata*. They might have done this long after their arrival in the island, even using a written version of the epic. However, there are many other possibilities. Sinhalese is an Indo-Aryan language, so at some point must have been brought from North India, and one can hardly imagine that those who brought it were without myths and oral traditions. Perhaps these traditions were already influenced by the Sanskrit epic tradition, which must have had a long oral prehistory before it reached written form. But we do not have to assume that the influence operated only in one direction, from Epic to Chronicle; nor indeed that the same explanation applies to every similarity.

However, all the hypothetical explanations mentioned so far are based on another assumption which may very well be wrong: we cannot be sure that the interaction of the two genres took place within South Asia. Most of my publications over the last twenty-five years have compared the *Mahābhārata* with Greco-Roman narratives of various genres, building on the idea that all three bodies of tradition derive from what I call a or the early Indo-European proto-narrative (e.g., Allen 2011). If the *Mahābhārata* can usefully be compared with Greco-Roman traditions as well as with the *Mahāvam̐sa*, one expects to find useful comparisons between the *Mahāvam̐sa* and traditions from the western end of the Indo-European world (as it were, the third side of a triangular comparison).

I mentioned at the start some other scholars who have compared bits of the *Mahāvam̐sa* with bits of early western narratives, but I suspect their insights are just the tip of an iceberg. I am particularly excited by the fact that parts of the Chronicle resemble, not only Greek epic and drama, but also the pseudo-history of early Rome. Until these comparisons have been worked through, it would be

¹¹ The simplest form of interrelation is probably sequence. Suppose one has established that entity L in one tradition parallels entity λ in another, and similarly that M parallels μ. If entity L/λ precedes M/μ, this is a rapprochement additional to the two already established.

premature to offer a firm theory to explain the Chronicle-Epic similarities (assuming that a single theory is what we need).

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