On the Early History of the Brahmanical Yugas

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Albert Hoffstädt's best friend, Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70–19 BCE), repeatedly dealt with the Hesiodic myth of the metallic races and its conception of a Golden Age (*aurea aetas*), making himself responsible both for its “integration into the Roman history and *imaginaire*”¹ and for influential innovations in its narrative structure and meaning. Like his near contemporaries Catullus, Horace, and Ovid, Virgil made frequent use of this myth to express his feelings and inclinations in the much troubled political circumstances of the end of the Republic and the early years of the Empire. Catullus and Horace had resorted to the motif of the Iron Age to describe the climate of moral depravation and political violence that, due to the neglect of *pietas*, threatened civil institutions and freedom. From his very first remarks on the Golden Age in the fourth *Eclogue*, and probably still in support of Antony, Virgil repeatedly expressed his belief in a possible restoration of the Golden Age. In the *Aeneid*, the advent of Augustus coincided with the return of the *aurea aetas*, which rural Italy had been embodying since the very foundation of the *Urbs*. Virgil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid* thus came close to the new regime's propagandistic uses of the myth, whereas Ovid argued that the Augustan restoration of peace and laws was not to be confounded with the spontaneity of justice that characterized the Golden Age. A few decades later, Seneca and others welcomed Nero as the founder of a *saeculum felix*, which, again, coincided with the regime's ideology and self-legitimation strategies, often resorting to prophecies.

In Virgil as well as in his influential model, Aratus's *Phenomena*, the four main features of the *aurea aetas* are the absence of war, the absence of travels (made unnecessary by autarchy), nature's spontaneous abundance, and the humans' natural practice of piety and justice (other motifs include vegetarianism and the commensality of gods and humans). While yielding a similar picture of the Golden Age, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.90–150) provide a more systematic account of the gradual degeneration of human society. In the Silver Age (or race, *argentea proles*) the four seasons make their appearance with hot summers and cold winters forcing humans to seek shelter, whereas the Bronze Age

1 Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, *Mythologie et littérature à Rome: La réécriture des mythes aux Iers siècles avant et après J.-C.* (Lausanne: Éditions Payot, 1998), 29.

(*aenea proles*) sees an increase in cruelty. The fourth and last period, the Iron Age (*aetas ferrea*), characterizes itself by the disappearance of all virtues (honor, truthfulness, faith) and their replacement by vices such as treachery, violence and greed; crime, theft, and mistrust are substituted for justice; war and seafaring appear together with land allotment, agriculture, and mining.

Directly or indirectly, all known versions of the myth go back to Hesiod's (seventh century BCE) original account in the *Works and Days* (106–202). Here, the history of mankind is divided into five successive states referred to as “races,” with heroes or demi-gods (many of them died at Troy, the survivors living in secluded islands under king Kronos) appearing between the Bronze and Iron Races. In the time of Kronos, the Golden Race, dear to the gods, lived a god-like life without fear, misery, illness, and old age. This age of peace and beauty was made especially prosperous thanks the earth's spontaneous and abundant production. A most violent Silver Race succeeded it; created by Olympian gods whom, in its impiety, it failed to honor properly, it was destroyed by Zeus, who replaced it by the belligerent Bronze Race. Born from ash wood, this strong and ugly race disappeared into black and silent Hades. Finally, the short-lived Iron Race knows almost only suffering and worries with neither love nor friendship; offending their parents, its representatives are envious, violent and mischievous, plundering neighboring cities and paying no respect to oaths and justice.

The Graeco-Roman myth of the metallic races has long been recognized to bear close resemblance to the ancient Indian doctrine of the four *yugas*—“ages,” “eons,” “(cosmic) periods”: *kṛtayuga*, *tretāyuga*, *dvāparayuga*, and, most famous among them, *kaliyuga*.² In spite of the fact that the metallic symbolism is conspicuously absent in the Indian context (the four *yugas* are traditionally reported to borrow their names from the dice game, from the winning throw to the losing throw, see below), the *yugas* have, from the earliest days of Western indological scholarship as well as among esoteric circles,³ been com-

2 By far the best study to date is Luis González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas: India's Greatest Epic Poem and the Hindu System of the World Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). See also Luis González-Reimann, “Cosmic Cycles, Cosmology, and Cosmography,” in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 1, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 411–28.

3 This was the case, e.g., of William Jones (1746–1794) and Paulinus a Sancto Bartholomaeo (1748–1806; *Systema Brahmanicum liturgicum mythologicum civile* [Romae: Apud Antonium Fulgonium, 1791]; note, e.g., p. 209—for you Albert: *Adde his, aetates indicas in quatuor disper-tiri, et primam quidem kṛdayugam, vel satyayugam seu veritatis & iustitiae aetatem usque ad diluvium perdurasse, secundam dvidiayugam dictam, a diluvio seu prima incarnatione Vishnu in piscem incepisse, tertiam tredayugam seu aetatem cupream triginta annis post mortem dei Krshnae, quae ad annum circiter 1000 ante Christum natum reiicienda est, sinivisse, ad circa id tempus kaliyugam seu aetatem ferream incepisse...*). Note also René Guénon, *La Crise du monde*

pared if not identified with the Hesiodic races/ages. The doctrine finds its first but already mature expression in two closely related second- to third-century CE (parts of) texts, the *Manusmṛti* (*Laws of Manu*, 1.81–86) and the third book of India's great epic, the *Mahābhārata* (e.g., 3.148, 186–189). The four *yugas* are ascribed descending durations (4,000, 3,000, 2,000, 1,000 years). Each of them being preceded by a period of dawn (400, 300, 200, 100 years) and a period of dusk (same duration), the aggregate period, referred to as a *yuga* (and later as a *caturyuga*, “fourfold *yuga*,” or a *mahāyuga*, “great *yuga*”), amounts to 12,000 years (a thousand such *yugas* amount to a Day of Brahmā). The criterion most commonly resorted to in order to estimate this degeneration is the Law (*dharma*, behavioral, ritual, social and cosmic order, including, first and foremost, the integrity of the caste-classes and the stages of life), which is said to be diminished by one fourth in each successive *yuga*. In the same way, “age after age ... virility, wisdom, strength, and influence shrink by one-fourth.”⁴ Cosmological and apocalyptic/millenarian uses of the doctrine can be distinguished according to whether it is intended as a relatively neutral account of the cosmic time structure or, rather, as an *ex post facto* description (generally in the future tense of prophecy) of the *present* in terms of the scenario of the End.

If, in spite of ancient India's reluctance for seafaring, the absence of navigation seems not to characterize the *kṛtayuga*, the absence of fear and conflicts, the spontaneity of both the Law and nature (with or without sowing and labor) are recurring features of the first age. Other aspects include the absence of gods, diseases, suffering, discontent, pride, envy, and trade. Sacrifice appears in the *tretāyuga* together with austerities and donations. During the *dvāparayuga*, the Veda becomes fourfold, truthfulness collapses as diseases and disasters increase. Among the countless features of the *kaliyuga* (or of the *yugānta*), mention can be made of the fatal deterioration of Law and truthfulness; the end of the Vedic life-rules and rituals; crop failures and drought; social, sexual and dietary disorders; foreign invasions, false policies and plunder; trade, game and taxes, etc. In this dreadful last period, people are short-lived (men turn grey in their sixteenth year), of little vigor and valor; seven or eight-year-old girls become pregnant; women cast off all morals, have intercourse with the mouth

moderne (Paris: Gallimard, 1973 [1946]), 21: “La doctrine hindoue enseigne que la durée d'un cycle humain ... se divise en quatre âges, qui marquent autant de phases d'un obscurcissement graduel de la spiritualité primordiale; ce sont ces mêmes périodes que les traditions de l'antiquité occidentale, de leur côté, désignèrent comme les âges d'or, d'argent, d'airain et de fer.” Most sincere thanks are due to Christophe Vielle for his generous help with these and other fascinating materials.

- 4 *Mahābhārata* 3.188.13, translation J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, 2: *The Book of the Assembly Hall*; 3: *The Book of the Forest* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 594.

and, “secretly deceiving their husbands, lasciviously fornicate with slaves and even cattle”⁵; Vedic students drink liquor and swive their teachers’ wives, while the aged behave like children; odors become stench and flavors putrid; the crossroads bristle with jackals, the cows give little milk, and the trees yield few flowers and fruits.

To the best of my knowledge, the two dispositifs have no common Indo-European ancestry.⁶ The origins of the four-*yuga* system remain shrouded in mystery even after Luis González-Reimann’s path-breaking study of the ways in which the doctrine made its way into the *Mahābhārata*. In spite of various uses of the word *yuga* as early as the *R̥gveda* (1,500–1,000 BCE; in the sense of a human generation or of an undefined time period) and the mention of longer periods of time (a hundred and ten thousand years) in the *Atharvaveda* (around 1,000 BCE?), “Vedic literature shows no awareness of large recurring time cycles [and does not] seem interested in the possibility of world destruction” (González-Reimann, “Cosmic Cycles,” 412b). Even if Babylonian influences have been postulated concerning the duration of *yugas* in later, Purāṇic materials (417b), and if Greek influence on the four descending ages is perhaps not to be entirely ruled out according to González-Reimann (*ibid.*, 416b), hypotheses concerning the origin, the formation and the early history of the doctrine are still very much a desideratum.⁷

To begin with, most scholars seem to take a simultaneous appearance and parallel, organic growth of all four *yugas* for granted. This scenario looks very unlikely to me. Let me consider first Aśvaghoṣa, a celebrated Buddhist monk, poet and dramatist whose works cannot be later than 100–150 CE, i.e., about one century earlier than the *Laws of Manu* and the relevant sections of the *Mahābhārata* (the latter could be even younger). To begin with, the two intermediate ages, the *tretāyuga* and the *dvāparayuga*, are conspicuously absent from Aśvaghoṣa’s extant writings (the *Buddhacarita* or *Life of the Buddha* and the *Saundarananda* or *Handsome Nanda*; two fragmentary dramas have come down to us as well). On the contrary, Aśvaghoṣa is well acquainted with the *kṛtayuga*, to which he alludes several times, e.g., while describing king

5 *Mahābhārata* 3.186.55; trans. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, 588.

6 Note, however, that Michael Witzel holds the four ages to belong to what he calls “Laurasian mythology.” See Michael Witzel, *The Origins of the World’s Mythologies* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 86–87.

7 González-Reimann’s insightful remarks concerning the *Mahābhārata* as a “Kali” poem (conflict, war, bad luck, misfortune) and the felt necessity to “codify” and make time predictable are extremely useful in this connection. See González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 138–163. On Johannes Bronkhorst’s views on the passage from conceptions of the (near) end of the (*kali*)*yuga* to conceptions of a (long) *kaliyuga*, which I endorse, and which the present essay makes even more likely in my opinion, see below.

Śuddhodana, the Buddha's father, as "abiding by the law of righteousness of the golden age,"⁸ or the king's subjects as rejoicing in Kapilavāstu (Śuddhodana's capital city and the Buddha's birth-place, so to say) "as in the golden age of Manu, in happiness, plenty and virtue."⁹ What about the *kaliyuga*? As far as I can see, the expression does not occur in the *Saundarananda* and the first part of the *Buddhacarita*, which has been preserved in its Sanskrit original, but verse 21.64 of the *Buddhacarita*, which has been preserved in Tibetan,¹⁰ likely reflects Aśvaghoṣa's use of the expression, provided that the Tibetan expression *rtsod ldan dus* renders the Sanskrit *kaliyuga*. J.S. Negi's *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary* (vol. XI [2003], 4756a) records at least one occurrence of Tibetan *rtsod ldan dus* used to translate *kali(yuga)*, and Tibetan *rtsod pa'i dus* is well attested as a standard rendering of *kaliyuga* in other Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionaries. The same stanza (*Buddhacarita* 21.64) provides us with an additional allusion to the *kṛtayuga* (Tibetan *rdzogs ldan [gyi] dus*) in Aśvaghoṣa's writings. As we shall see, the *Mahābhārata* and other Brahmanical sources not only describe the *kaliyuga*, but also the *yugānta* or "end of a/the *yuga*," where *yuga* is likely intended in the sense of the entire four-*yuga* pattern, or as an unspecified era.¹¹ To put it briefly, the *yugānta* "is a time of great destruction, caused mainly by natural forces: torrential rains, implied by the rolling clouds and the thunder; earthquakes ...; terrible winds ...; and an intense, resplendent Sun; but most of all fire, an all-consuming fire that destroys everything. There are also comets and meteors, as well as negative planetary configurations."¹² In *Buddhacarita* 16.30, Aśvaghoṣa compares the imperturbable Buddha with Brahmā who "at the end of the great eon ... shines sitting when the conflagration dies down."¹³ The Tibetan expression E.H. Johnston translates with "(conflagration at) the end of the great eon" is *dus mtha'i me*, which almost certainly renders the ubiquitous Sanskrit expression *yugāntāgni*, literally "the fire at the

8 *Saundarananda* 2.25c, translation E.H. Johnston, *The Saundarananda or Nanda the Fair, Translated from the Original Sanskrit of Aśvaghoṣa* (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), 10.

9 *Saundarananda* 3.41cd-42, translation Johnston, *The Saundarananda*, 19.

10 Derge edition of the Tibetan canon (*Bstan 'gyur*) Ge 77b6-7.

11 On the *yugānta*, see González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 64-73, Johannes Bronkhorst, "The Historiography of Brahmanism," in *History and Religion: Narrating a Religious Past*, ed. Bernd-Christian Otto et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), and below.

12 González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 71.

13 Derge edition of the Tibetan canon (*Bstan 'gyur*) Ge 60a3, translation E.H. Johnston, *Aśvaghoṣa's Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha (in three parts: Sanskrit Text of Cantos I-XIV with English Translation of Cantos I-XXVIII, Cantos I to XIV translated from the Original Sanskrit supplemented by the Tibetan Version and Cantos XV to XXVIII from the Tibetan and Chinese Versions* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 17.

end of a/the *yuga*.” To sum up, Aśvaghoṣa is familiar with the *kṛtayuga*, the *il-lud tempus* of ideal kings and seers (*ṛṣi*), the *kalīyuga*, and the *yugānta*, but never refers to the intermediate periods of the *tretā*- and *dvāparayugas*.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, ancient India's second great epic, reveals roughly similar tendencies. Although the *Rāmāyaṇa*, like the *Mahābhārata*, cannot be dated with any degree of certainty (between 500 BCE and 500 CE?) and has undergone much reworking, it looks like significant parts of the core narrative (cantos 2–6) were known to Aśvaghoṣa in pretty much the same form as the ones we now read, as Gawroński and others have demonstrated.¹⁴ A quick search into the electronic text of the *Rāmāyaṇa*¹⁵ entirely confirms reading notes and impressions: *tretāyuga* occurs six times in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, all of them in book 7 (17.31, 65.11–12, 65.17, 67.18, 68.1); *dvāparayuga* presents the same overall distribution with only four occurrences in book 7 (65.19, 20, 21, 23). Either alone or in compound expressions, *kalī(yuga)* surprisingly only occurs at 7.65.22 (for *tiṣya*, a synonym of *kalī(yuga)*, see below). Now, the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s books 1 and 7 are almost unanimously regarded as later additions.¹⁶ In other words, the totality of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s allusions to the *tretā*-, *dvāpara*- and *kalīyugas* (with the possible exception of the *tiṣya* occurrence) can safely be considered later additions reflecting conceptions widely attested in the *Mahābhārata* and early Purāṇas. The *kṛtayuga* is only slightly better represented with six occurrences in book 7 (2.4, 17.31, 53.3, 65.9, 70.5, 88.8), two in book 1 (1.73, 44.14) and two in books 5 (1.108) and 6 (26.13), the only ones justified to claim some antiquity. *Rāmāyaṇa* 6.26.13 is certainly the most interesting among them. After revealing that the Blessed One had created two parties, the dharmic gods and the adharmic anti-gods, Mālyavat, a parent of cruel Rāvaṇa, explains that “[when]

14 See Andrzej Gawroński, *Studies about the Sanskrit Buddhist Literature, Collected Papers*, ed. Marek Mejer (Warsaw: Research Centre of Buddhist Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Univ. Warsaw, 2012 [the article “Studies about the Sanskrit Buddhist Literature” was initially published in 1919]), 102. Gawroński's systematic research was based on book 2.

15 See the digitized Poona critical edition at <<http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil.html#Ram>>, last accessed 26 December 2019.

16 See John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 379–83 and 391. These two books are regarded as the third stage of growth of the epic, the second stage consisting of various types of inflation (expansion, interpolation) in books 2–6, criteria for which can be either formal/stylistic (ornateness in language and style, long compounds, prosody) or material (Purāṇic elements, divinity of Rāma, etc.). The addition of stage three is not earlier than the first to second century CE and may very well be dated to the fourth century CE, if not later. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* as in the *Mahābhārata*, this addition “seems ... to be linked with passing from the hands of their traditional reciters ... into those of the brāhmanas as the guardians of all traditional learning,” and reflects a “process of adaptation to brāhman values” (religious, ethical, cosmological) (Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 394). This process also reflects a “shift from oral to written transmission” (p. 395).

dharma eclipse[d] *adharma*, then the *kṛtayuga* prevailed, [but when] *adharma* eclipses *dharma*, then *tiṣya* (= *kali[yuga]*) breaks out.” What we actually find in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are comparatively abundant references to the *yugānta* or “end of a/the *yuga*,” only six of which occur in book 7 (6.55, 7.10, 15.9, 32.38, 61.20, 61.31), and none in books 1–2. Among the twenty-six occurrences of *yugānta* in books 3–6, twelve refer to the *yugāntāgni* (“the fire at the end of the/a *yuga*”) that we have already encountered in Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, the remaining fourteen referring to other aspects of the final cataclysm (suns, winds, clouds, lightning). The two occurrences of *yugakṣaye* (“at the close/consumption of the/a *yuga*”) in book 6 (82.38, 88.4) point in the same direction. To sum up, the early portions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* reflect no awareness of the *tretā*- and *dvāparayugas*. They only rarely allude to the *kṛta*- and the *kaliyugas* (in the form of *tiṣya*), operating almost exclusively with the *yugānta*. The evidence from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the works of Aśvaghoṣa suggests that in first-century CE Ayodhyā/Sāketa (the Rāmaite center, of which, according to colophons, Aśvaghoṣa was a native), cosmological and eschatological conceptions revolved around the three motifs of an “Edenic” *kṛtayuga* (widely used in reference to ideal kingship), a cataclysmic *yugānta* (most often in the context of similes and metaphors) and a still very discrete *kaliyuga/tiṣya* with unspecified mutual connections and no organic pattern of gradual degeneration.

Close attention should be paid in this connection to a curious little text, the so-called *Yugapurāṇa*, which, if its tentative dating by its learned editor could be confirmed, would be the earliest extant source concerning the four *yugas*.¹⁷ The 115-verse *Yugapurāṇa* forms section 41 of the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*, a bulky treatise (6,500 verses) on astral science twice referred to in the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁸ Given that the *Mahābhārata* explicitly refers to the text’s sixty-four divisions, the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* likely was known to its redactors “in a form at least very similar to its present form” (Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 10). From the fact that the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* and the *Yugapurāṇa* refer to the Indo-Greeks (*yavana*) and the Indo-Scythians (*śaka*) but not to later groups of foreign invaders such as the

17 See González-Reimann, “Cosmic Cycles,” 415a, and John E. Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa, Critically Edited, with an English Translation and a Detailed Introduction* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1986), vii. The overall interpretation of the *Yugapurāṇa* is my main, and basically unique, point of disagreement with González-Reimann, who, while apparently assenting to Mitchiner’s chronology, regards the text as a forerunner and possible source for the *Mahābhārata*’s (and, for this reason, the *Vāyuprakṛta purāṇam*, “the *purāṇa* revealed by [the god] Vāyu”) attempt to locate the epic events in the *yuga* scheme (see below). See González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 98–99 and 142.

18 For a summary of the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*, see David Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra, Astral and Mathematical Literature (A History of Indian Literature VI, 4)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), 69–72.

Pahlavas, the Kuṣāṇas, the Tuṣāras and the Hūṇas, J. Mitchiner deems it “reasonable to suggest at this stage a date of the composition of the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* as a whole during the period of Indo-Greek rule and presence in India, and before the Indo-Parthian and Kuṣāṇa invasions: namely some time prior to c. AD 25” (p. 11). Mitchiner’s final estimate is 25 BCE, about one century before Aśvaghoṣa. Mitchiner (pp. 14–16) sees no reason to doubt the authenticity of the *Yugapurāṇa* as an integral and original part of the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*: this section conforms in language, form and style to the rest of the treatise; the name *purāṇa* is given to other sections of the work as well; all extant complete manuscripts of the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* contain the *Yugapurāṇa* chapter; no independent manuscript of the *Yugapurāṇa* or any other part of the work has come to light. As for the unity of composition of the chapter, it has received only little attention from the editor: judged on metrical criteria, “the text of the *Yugapurāṇa* is on the whole reasonably unitary” (p. 14).

The text presents itself as a cosmological-historical exposition delivered by Śaṅkara/Śiva in answer to a set of questions posed by Skanda: “What was the nature of the Time which has gone by in the past, and what is to be the nature [of Time in the future]? What [will be] the length of life and what the bodily form of living beings: and what also will be the strength of *tapas* (ascetic practices) at the end of the Yuga? What [will be] the degree of authority at the start of the Yuga, and the *dharma* (forms of righteous conduct) in each Yuga: and at the end of the Yuga, [what] will be the state of affairs at that time, O Lord of Creatures?”¹⁹ Śiva’s answer consists in an account of the four *yugas* (vv. 6–37): *kr̥tayuga* (vv. 6–14), *tretāyuga* (vv. 15–22), *dvāparayuga* (vv. 23–36), and *kalīyuga* (vv. 37–113). During the *kr̥tayuga* of supreme virtue, fear, death, thieves, greed, anger, passions, deceit, depravity and sexual union were unknown; trees bore fruit at will and the earth was full of corn; gods and other supernatural beings were born, and the humans’ life-span amounted to 100,000 years.

The *kr̥tayuga* ended with a big battle at the end of which Brahmā created the aristocratic and military caste (*kṣatra*, i.e., *kṣatriyas*). Women, the four caste-classes, sacrifices, treatises and mantras appeared during the *tretāyuga*; humans were upright and not deceitful, dedicated to *dharma* and their own socio-religious duty; their life-span decreased to 10,000 years as anger and greed descended upon the surface of the earth. Rāma (Paraśurāma or Jāmadagnya, not the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*) caused the disappearance of the entire caste of the warriors (likely to avenge the death of his father at their hands). In spite of the fact that truth, righteousness and sacrifices remained, and one quarter of the *dharma* was left, the *dvāparayuga* proved “terrible” (*ghora*), with

19 *Yugapurāṇa* 1cd-3, translation Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 87.

a decrease of the life-span to 1,000 years and an apocalyptic war causing the destruction of the earth, men, and kings.²⁰ This war is none other than the one narrated in the *Mahābhārata*, the most important characters of which are mentioned by name, including Keśava (= Viṣṇu) in the form of Vāsudeva (= Kṛṣṇa). The description of the *kaliyuga*, starting with king Pārīkṣit (vv. 38–39), occupies the rest of the chapter, where general descriptions of the gloomy last age (vv. 50–55, 82–86, 90–94) alternate with seemingly historical characters and narratives.²¹ The *Yugapurāṇa*’s description of the *kaliyuga* ends with an optimistic note. Calm, patience and self-restraint, as well as the firm upholders of Brahmanical values, will remain at the consumption of the *yuga* as twelve regions (*maṇḍala*) are created with a view to the welfare of surviving living beings (vv. 95–113) in a climate that is evocative of the dawn of a new *kṛtayuga* (the expression does not occur in this context).

The *Yugapurāṇa*’s account of the *kaliyuga* seems odd. The expression *kaliyuga* appears three times at the very outset of the account (vv. 37, 38, 40) and then entirely disappears.²² What one finds instead are repeated allusions to the end of the *yuga*, most of which occur in refrain-like manner at the end of (half-)verses in the form *yugakṣaye*, “at the consumption/close of the *yuga*.” This pattern is reflected in no less than eleven verses (50–51, 95–97, 99, 102–104, 110, 113), an additional one consisting in the equally formulaic *yugānte samupasthite*, “when the end of the *yuga* is at hand” (v. 53). This, together with the “*yuga*’s end” of v. 91, suggests that the major part of vv. 37–113 was intended as a description, not of the *kaliyuga*, but of the *yugānta*.²³ The pattern is clearly reminiscent of at least two passages in the *Mārkaṇḍeya* section of the *Mahābhārata* (3.186–189). In 3.186, the relevant segment (vv. 24–55) occurs immediately after a general outline of the four-*yuga* system (vv. 17cd–23) that reflects the same doctrine as the *Laws of Manu* (1.81–86). Eight references to the

20 The use of the future tense starts with the description of the end of the *dvāparayuga*, suggesting that Śiva’s exposition takes place before the *Mahābhārata* battle. The *Yugapurāṇa* is thus as much a narration of the past as a prophecy.

21 Foundation of Pāṭaliputra by Udāyin together with subsequent events connected to kings Śaliśūka, Sādhuketa and Vijaya (vv. 40–46), disorders caused by the invasion of the Indo-Greeks (vv. 47–48 and 56–57), the desolation caused by the seven mighty kings of Śāketa and the Agniveśyas (vv. 58–61), appearance of the king of the Śakas (vv. 62–65), events connected with kings Āmrāṭa/Lohitākṣa, Gopāla, Puṣpaka, Anaranya, Vikuyaśas, Agnimitra (vv. 66–78), Agniveśya and his struggle against the Śabaras (vv. 79–81), king Śatuvāra and the massacres caused by the Śakas (vv. 87–89).

22 I am not inclined to interpret *kalipriyam* in v. 96 as a reference to the *kaliyuga*.

23 An additional feature of the passage is the repeated, here again refrain-like occurrence of *na (atra) samśayaḥ*, generally at the end of the verse. The pattern is reflected in vv. 38, 42, 48, 50–52, 54, 57, 64, 78, 85, 92.

yugānta can be numbered (against one for the *kaliyuga*, v. 27), three of which consist of end-of-verse *yugakṣaye*, “at the consumption/close of the *yuga*” (vv. 35, 42, 48). Most striking is, however, 3.188. The passage presents itself as Mārkaṇḍeya’s answer to Yudhiṣṭhira’s question about the *kaliyuga*, which he makes every impression of deliberately equating with the end of the *yuga* (see vv. 4–7). Here again, the passage opens with a short outline of the four *yugas* (vv. 9–12). This short introduction, in which the *kaliyuga* is not explicitly mentioned, reflects the “orthodox” doctrine of the descending four quarters of the *dharma*. The seventy-one verses that follow (vv. 13–84) contain no less than thirty-eight explicit references to the end of the *yuga*,²⁴ all of them in the locative, and more or less with the same meaning (“at the end of the *yuga*”): *yugānte paryupasthite* (vv. 19, 35–37, 39, 43–44, 47, 54, 76, 81, 83), *yugakṣaye* (vv. 20–23, 25, 32–33, 41, 50–51, 78, 85), *yugānte* (vv. 49, 53, 66, 73, 79), *yugasankṣaye* (vv. 55, 62, 64), *gate yuge* (v. 69), *yuge kṣiṇe* (v. 66), and *tadā sankṣepsyate yugam* (“then the *yuga* will end,” vv. 59, 67–68). There is little doubt in my opinion that the original intent of this passage was the *yugānta*, not the *kaliyuga*. *Yugapurāṇa* 37–113, *Mahābhārata* 3.186 and 3.188 thus seem to exhibit a very similar structure in which a lengthy development dedicated to the *yugānta* is introduced, and sometime concluded, by a generally much shorter and ideologically standardized outline of the four (or only three) *yugas*. In all cases, this reorganization results in the *yugānta* becoming the end, not of an unspecified era, as it originally was in my opinion, but of the *kaliyuga*, hence of a four-*yuga* period. I cannot resist the impression that, in those three passages, original apocalyptic/prophetic accounts of the *yugānta* were provided with a new meaning by incorporating them into the alien and most probably more recent framework of the four *yugas*.

These three passages have another feature in common. As we have seen, the *Yugapurāṇa* lays strong emphasis on the political events to take place at the end of the *yuga*. Some at least among these events pertain to intruding barbarian (*mleccha*) kings or groups such as the Indo-Greeks, the Indo-Scythians, and king Āmrāṭa/Lohitākṣa. The Indo-Greeks, “infatuated by war,” (v. 56), are made responsible for the ruin of Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna), various disorders, and a great war. The mighty king of the Śakas is “greedy for wealth,” “vicious,” “evil” and “goes while plundering,” and “when the Śaka realm has been destroyed, the earth will be desolate.”²⁵ “Then the terrible Śaka will cause the peoples, acting for their own destruction..., to be also scattered.... He will destroy a quarter of living beings by arms; [while] the Śakas will take a quarter of the

24 Including *paścime kāle*, “in the final period/time” (v. 52).

25 *Yugapurāṇa* vv. 62–64, translation Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 93.

wealth to their own city.”²⁶ As for Āmrāṭa the Mleccha, “red-eyed and wearing red garments, having robbed the helpless people, [he] will then cause them to be destroyed. Then that king will destroy the four *varṇas* [caste-classes, VE].”²⁷ To be sure, the barbarian kings have no monopoly over political and social violence in the *Yugapurāṇa*, but they are indiscriminately regarded as evil. Consider now *Mahābhārata* 3.186.29–31: “Many barbarian kings, O overlord of men, will rule the earth with false policies, being given to evil and lies. Āndhras will be kings then, Scythians, Pulindas, Greeks, Kambojas, Auruṇikas, serfs, and Ābhīras. Not a brahmin then lives by his own Law, and likewise the barons and commoners work at the wrong tasks, O king.”²⁸ As for *Mahābhārata* 3.188, it exhibits a refrain-like statement to the effect that at the end of the *yuga* “the entire world is/will be barbarized” (*mlecchabhūtaṃ jagat sarvaṃ*, vv. 29, 37, 45). Other references to barbarians in 3.188 include vv. 52 (“all men will be omnivorous barbarians, cruel in all their deeds”) and 70: “The earth will soon be overrun by barbarians, while the brahmins, out of fear of the tax burden, flee in all the directions.”²⁹ The *Yugapurāṇa* is certainly unique in its insistence on the political factors at play at the end of the *yuga*, but all three texts refer, sometime in a fairly insistent manner, to barbarian rule and habits as sure signs and decisive causes of the End.³⁰

As suggested above, *Mahābhārata* 3.186 and 188 seem to betray a recontextualization of passages originally dedicated to the *yugānta*. Now, can the *kalīyuga*/*yugānta* part of the *Yugapurāṇa* (vv. 37–113) be shown to have undergone a similar process of “adaptive re-use”? In other words, can the initial outline of the first three *yugas* and the beginning of the “*kalīyuga*” section be shown to be anachronistic? Towards the end of the *tretāyuga* section, the *Yugapurāṇa* mentions (Paraśu)rāma (v. 22); a few verses below, at the end of the *dvāparayuga* section (v. 30), it refers to Vāsudeva (≈ Kṛṣṇa). At least as far as Vāsudeva is concerned, these allusions have nothing anachronistic in themselves: by the putative date of the text (25 BCE), Vāsudeva was a well-known figure referred to not only by the grammarian Pāṇini (fourth century BCE; *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 4.3.98), but also by several second- to first-century BCE epigraphs such as, e.g., Heliodoros’s (a Greek ambassador in Taxila) famous Garuḍa pillar inscription at

26 *Yugapurāṇa* vv. 88–89, translation Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 95.

27 *Yugapurāṇa* vv. 68–69, translation Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 93.

28 Translation van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, 586–87.

29 Translation van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, 595–96.

30 See Vincent Eltschinger, *Buddhist Epistemology as Apologetics* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2014), 34–72, Bronkhorst, “Historiography,” 29–32, González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 97.

Besnagar.³¹ In addition, Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is represented with four arms, a conch, a disk, and a mace (the attributes of the “future” Hindu god Viṣṇu) from the end of the first century BCE (Malhār/Bilaspur in Central India; see Schmid, *Don de voir*, 112–118), so that at least part of what follows need not surprise us (*Yugapurāṇa* vv. 29–30): “Keśava will arise at the end of the Dvāpara, in order to destroy horses and elephants, princes and men; [he will be] four-armed, of great valour, bearing the conch, disk and mace: [and he will be] called Vāsudeva, the strong one, dressed in yellow clothes.”³² What is striking about this passage is that it opens the *Yugapurāṇa*’s detailed account of the *Mahābhārata*’s plot and personnel (vv. 31–36), which the text thus locates at the close of the *dvāparayuga* (this has been the most current view about them from Purāṇic Hinduism onward):

Then, resembling Kailāsa, wearing a garland of flowers [and] bearing the plough as weapon, there will arise Yudhiṣṭhira—the excellent king of the Pāṇḍavas—for the purpose of slaughter at the end of the Dvāpara, together with [his] four brothers: [namely] both Bhīmasena the son of Vāyu, and Phālguna of severe *tapas* [austerity, VE], and the two brothers Nakula and Sahadeva, born of the Aśvins. Also Bhīṣma, Droṇa and others, and the prince Dhṛṣṭadyumna: and Karṇa, the king of Aṅga, together with Aśvatthāman the invincible; Devala and Śatadhanvan, and Dārūka the illustrious—they will arise at the end of the Yuga, in order to protect the world of men. So too Śakuni and Dantavakra, and Śiśupāla the haughty: together with Śalya, Rukmi, Jarāsandha, Kṛtavarma [and] Jayadratha. The cause [of strife] of these mighty kings will be Kṛṣṇā, the daughter of Drupada: [and] the earth will go to [her] destruction.³³

As demonstrated by González-Reimann,³⁴ however, the *Mahābhārata*’s own statements to the effect that its plot would belong to the end of the *dvāparayuga* (and that Kṛṣṇa’s death would open the *kaliyuga*) are extremely scarce, isolated, and demonstrably late—as is, of course, the *Mahābhārata*’s own summary of contents at 1.2 (Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 135), where such claims find their first expression in the great Epic (*Mahābhārata* 1.2.9: “And once the junc-

31 On the early history of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, see Charlotte Schmid, *Le Don de voir: Premières représentations krishnaïtes de la région de Mathurā* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2010). See also Gérard Colas, “Bhāgavatas,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 3, ed. Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 295b.

32 Translation Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 90.

33 Ibid.

34 See González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 86–107.

ture of the *kali* and the *dvāpara* was reached, there was a war between the armies of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas in Samantapañcaka"). In other words, if Mitchiner's early chronology were to be accepted, the author(s) of the *Yugapurāṇa* would be the first witness(es), and likely inventor(s), of a central theological-mythological complex that only appears about three centuries later in the *Mahābhārata* itself. Considered in this light, the verses on Keśava appearing as Vāsudeva (vv. 29–30) are perhaps liable to a different interpretation. The text's reference to the four arms, the conch, the disk, and the mace could very well refer to Viṣṇu himself, in which case Vāsudeva(-Kṛṣṇa) could be understood as a manifestation of the latter (Keśava appears *with the name* Vāsudeva), even if the vocabulary of traditional Vaiṣṇava theology (*avatāra*, *prādurbhāva*, *vyūha*, etc., all meaning something like "manifestation" or "embodiment") is not represented in our text. Now, this would be incompatible with a late first-century BCE date given that even the *Bhagavadgītā* (first to second century CE) does not consider Kṛṣṇa, its main protagonist, to be a manifestation of Viṣṇu.³⁵ Clear allusions to Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa being a manifestation of Viṣṇu seem not to be attested before late strata of the *Mahābhārata* such as the first (1.61.90, *aṃśāvataraṇa*, "partial embodiment") and especially the twelfth books (12.326.61, etc., *prādurbhāva*, "appearance"). According to A. Malinar, "[a]lthough there are some epic passages in which Kṛṣṇa is considered to be identical with the god Viṣṇu or is addressed as Viṣṇu, this identification, making Kṛṣṇa an embodiment (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu, seems to have been a later development. The earliest sources, in which Kṛṣṇa becomes part of a Vaiṣṇava genealogy and which turn him into one of the various embodiments of Viṣṇu, are the *Harivaṃśa* (second to third cents. CE) and the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (third to fourth cents. CE)."³⁶ As we have seen, moreover, the *Yugapurāṇa* describes Vāsudeva as "dressed in yellow clothes." The motif may presuppose passages such as *Mahābhārata* 3.148, which associate different colors (and names) with Viṣṇu in each *yuga*: Nārāyaṇa is white in the *kr̥tayuga*; Acyuta is red in the *tretāyuga*; Viṣṇu is yellow in the *dvāparayuga*; and Keśava is black (*kr̥ṣṇa*!) in the *kaliyuga*. As for the *Yugapurāṇa*'s allusion to Rāma (v. 22–23a), "at the end

35 The *Bhagavadgītā* (vv. 4.6–7), however, is often regarded as providing a first general concept of the motif: "Although I am unborn and imperishable and the lord of the creatures indeed, I transform nature (*prakṛti*) that is mine and take birth through an appearance of myself (*ātmamāyā*). For whenever the Law (*dharma*) languishes, Bhārata, and lawlessness (*adharma*) flourishes, I create myself. I take on existence from eon (*yuga*) to eon, for the rescue of the good and the destruction of the evil, in order to reestablish the Law." Translation as in André Couture, "Avatāra," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 2, ed. Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 702a.

36 Angelika Malinar, "Kṛṣṇa," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 1: 609b.

of the Tretā Yuga ... the earth was made devoid of kṣatriyas thrice-seven times by Rāma. Then, when the Kṣatra had been destroyed...,³⁷ it is likely to presuppose passages such as *Mahābhārata* 3.117.9: “Twenty-one times the lord emptied the earth of barons [kṣatriyas, VE].” As far as I can see, however, this passage of the *Mahābhārata* does not associate the famous episode of Rāma’s revenge with the *tretāyuga*. Such an association seems only to appear, again, in the Epic’s summary of contents at *Mahābhārata*’s 1.2.3: “At the juncture of the *tretā* and the *dvāpara* [yugas], Rāma the best among warriors several times destroyed all the terrestrial kṣatriyas (*pārthivaṃ kṣatram*).” The parallelism cannot be clearer: in addition to the episode itself, both passages refer to the earth (*mahī, pārthiva*) and to the *kṣatra* (military order/power; the *kṣatriyas* as a whole). In both *Mahābhārata* 1.2 and the *Yugapurāṇa*, the only two stories narrated in this particular context are those of Rāma and Vāsudeva.

To sum up, close consideration of the *tretā*- and *dvāparayuga* sections of the *Yugapurāṇa* suggests their author’s likely indebtedness to late (second to fourth century CE?) strata of the *Mahābhārata* and perhaps other texts such as the *Harivaṃśa* and early Purāṇas. Alternatively, if the *Yugapurāṇa* is to be regarded as the source of the epic and early Purāṇic accounts, as Luis González-Reimann is inclined to believe, its elaboration on the four *yugas*—say, perhaps vv. 1–46—must postdate 25 BCE, unless one has to credit this short and rather isolated text with several major innovations in Indian religious history, such as Vāsudeva(-Kṛṣṇa) as a manifestation of Keśava(-Viṣṇu) and the assignment of Rāma to the juncture of the *tretā*- and *dvāparayugas* and of Vāsudeva and the *Mahābhārata* to the juncture of the *dvāpara*- and *kalīyugas*. In addition, the *Yugapurāṇa* would have to be the model for these two stories’ being the only ones narrated at the outset of *Mahābhārata* 1.2; for the episode of Rāma Jāmadagnya emptying the earth of all kṣatriyas; for other aspects such as the role played by Time (*kāla*) in the two accounts (compare v. 28 with *Mahābhārata* 1.2.25); and for numerous aspects of the legends of kings Janamejaya Pārīkṣit, Udāyin, and Śālīsūka that seem only to be attested in Purāṇic literature (Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 51–55). In short, the presence of all these motifs in a text from the first century BCE looks very implausible to me. To be sure, the *Mahābhārata* twice refers to the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*, but this does not mean that the author(s)/compiler(s) of the relevant sections of the Epic were acquainted with the *Yugapurāṇa*, at least in its present form. There are in my opinion some reasons to believe that the four-*yuga* framework of the *Yugapurāṇa* is a late addition intended to recontextualize an older, possibly end-of-the-first-century BCE account, not of the four *yugas*, but of the *yugānta*, “the end of the *yuga*.”

37 Translation Mitchiner, *The Yuga Purāṇa*, 89.

The formal, compositional and doctrinal features of the *Yugapurāṇa*, *Mahābhārata* 3.186 and 3.188 seem to point to two distinct layers: older apocalyptic accounts of the *yugānta* (first century BCE to second century CE?),³⁸ and a later reframing of these prophecies made in order to align them with the new Brahmanical, essentially Vaiṣṇava ideas concerning cosmology and, in one case at least, the historical manifestations of Viṣṇu (second to fourth century CE?).³⁹ In my opinion, this is likely to give even more weight to J. Bronkhorst's hypothesis that the (late Epic/early Purāṇic) conception of a long *kaliyuga* with a distant end imposed itself when apocalyptic expectations relating to the near end of the (*kali*)*yuga* proved wrong.

I am inclined to believe that the doctrine of the four *yugas* was still unknown to the authors/redactors of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (books 2–6) and Aśvaghōṣa in first-century CE Sāketa/Ayodhyā and surroundings, even if, strictly speaking, their silence does not make such a conclusion necessary. Their eschatological conceptions revolved around fairly widespread ideas concerning a cataclysmic *yugānta*; both texts testify to a belief in a “Golden Age” of celebrated kings and *ṛṣis* increasingly referred to as the *kr̥ta*(*yuga*) and, albeit sparsely, to some acquaintance with a degenerate time period named the *kali*(*yuga*), which could correspond in time with the *Mahābhārata*'s ubiquitous allusions to its own events as being *kali*, i.e., entailing conflict, war, bad luck, and misfortune. In addition, the chronology of the *Yugapurāṇa* (or at least parts of it, 25 BCE), a text that has often been regarded as the earliest extant witness to the four-*yuga* system, is far from warranted. I would thus hypothesize that the doctrine of the four *yugas* developed some time between the late first century and the late second century CE, likely on the basis of an analogy with the dice game. Once *kr̥ta* and *kali* were, so to speak, posited, those who created the new cosmology could easily resort to the terminology of the dice throws in order to fill in the new structure and give it a more distinctly degenerative physiognomy.⁴⁰ As shown by González-Reimann, the *Laws of Manu* testify to a similar attempt while reinterpreting two verses from the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* (600 BCE?) in which this terminology was used in order to indicate good and bad fortune. In

38 For a partial anticipation of this hypothesis, see González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 72.

39 On the “Vaiṣṇava appropriation” of the Epic by means of the doctrines of the *avatāras* and the *yugas*, see González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 103 and 151.

40 Think of the four Dalton brothers in the French comic book *Lucky Luke* by Morris and René Goscinny: only the smallest (Joe, the most stubborn and cruel of the four) and the tallest one (Averell, the most stupid and tender of the four) matter. The two intermediate brothers Jack and William play no other role in the narrative than suggesting a gradation in stupidity and cruelty.

the *Brāhmaṇa*, these verses are as follows: “The fortune of one who is sitting down, sits down; that of one who is standing, stands up. That of one who is lying down, lies down; the fortune of one who keeps moving, moves. Lying down one becomes Kali; getting up, Dvāpara. Standing, one becomes Tretā; by moving, one becomes Kṛta.”⁴¹ While reinterpreting these stanzas in the framework of political theory, the *Laws of Manu* (9.301–302) turn the metaphor of the dice throws into a *yuga* metaphor⁴²: “The sum of the king’s actions determines the Kṛta, the Tretā Yuga, the Dvāpara and the Kali, for the king is said to be the yuga. Asleep, he becomes the Kali; awake, the Dvāpara Yuga; ready to act, the Tretā; and when acting, the Kṛta Yuga.”⁴³ As we have seen, the *Laws of Manu* are generally regarded, together with the *Mahābhārata*, as the earliest extant witness to the conception of the four *yugas*. This is not to say that the author(s) of the *Laws of Manu*, or of the relevant sections of the third book of the *Mahābhārata*, were the creators of the motif (Mārkaṇḍeya claims his revelation at *Mahābhārata* 3.186–189 to be based on the *Vāyuproktaṃ purāṇam*, “the *purāṇa* revealed by Vāyu,” *Mahābhārata* 3.189.14), but it seems very likely to me that they belonged to the same milieu, and lived very close in time to its invention.

Whatever the relevance of the chronology suggested above, it seems likely that the four *yugas* did not originate as an organic system, but as a result of gradual accretion and ideologically motivated decisions made in order to update older cosmological and eschatological conceptions. Such a scenario is very unlikely to have led to the formation of the Hesiodic myth of the metallic races/ages, whatever the merits of Jean-Pierre Vernant’s hypothesis.⁴⁴ The Greco-Roman myth of the four/five ages and the Indian system of the four *yugas* present a clear case of superficially comparable structures, close historical analysis of which betrays logics and ideologies divergent enough to ruin every attempt at a heuristically fruitful comparison.

41 *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* 7.15 (33.3.3–4), translation González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 122.

42 Adapted from González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 123.

43 Translation, *ibid.*

44 Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Le mythe hésiodique des races. Essai d’analyse structurale” (1958), in Vernant, *Oeuvres, Religions, Rationalités, Politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 1: 255–80.