Preface

The Bhomāntaka (hitherto known as the Bhomakāwya) is the epic tale of the death of Bhoma, composed by an unknown author in twelfth century East Java in the Old Javanese language. This book contains a critical edition of the text and a translation into English, with an introduction that provides an ample discussion of its qualities as a work of literature.

The direct predecessor of this publication is the Dutch translation by Teeuw which appeared as his doctoral dissertation in 1946, written in difficult circumstances under German occupation. Teeuw’s promotor was Professor J. Gonda, of Utrecht University, an expert on Sanskrit and Old Javanese. The translation was based on the text published by R.Th.A. Friederich in 1852, with the collation of two Leiden manuscripts (for details, please see the Introduction), but this text did not accompany the translation.

The Bhomāntaka is not only very long (over 200 pages), but is also of special interest in view of its contents and its remarkable poetical qualities. Teeuw had long cherished the hope of returning to it, and this at last became possible when he had completed several other longstanding commitments and formed a team with Robson (as had happened before), with the backing of the Gonda Foundation, which provided the latter with financial support over a period of two years (2002-2003).

Work began in November 2001, and progress was remarkably quick. Teeuw typed out the entire text, consulted lontar manuscripts in the Leiden University Library and set up the critical notes, while Robson drafted the new translation. This was of course based on the new text, but the Dutch translation dating from 1946 was regularly compared. As a result of this it was possible to move faster than if one had had to start afresh. Although the style of the Dutch is rather different from the English, it certainly provided a possible solution to many problems. And apart from this, we also had the great advantage of P.J. Zoetmulder’s Old Javanese-English dictionary of 1982, whereas Teeuw had only H.N. van der Tuuk’s Kawi-Balinesisch-Nederlandsch woordenboek (1897-1912) and H.H. Juynboll’s Oudjavaansch-Nederlandsche woordenlijst (1923).

Drafts were exchanged canto by canto as email attachments, sometimes
from Bangkok and sometimes from Melbourne, and were revised in the light of suggestions received from Leiden. The final version was completed in August 2004. However, as the reader will soon see in the Commentary, there are still a large number of places where the author’s intention remains obscure and thus the translation can only be tentative. We can merely express the hope that another generation will be able to improve on our work, and may perhaps feel inspired to push on with the study of similar specimens of Old Javanese literature.

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