CHAPTER FOUR

WHY ITIHAŚA? NEW POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS IN CONSIDERING THE MAHĀBHĀRATA AS HISTORY

There are two basic, and optimally interrelated, approaches to the question of interpreting the Mahābhārata as a coherent “whole”\(^1\)—by which I mean the text of the Pune Critical Edition, the question of whose pros and cons I will be raising in chapter 5. One of these approaches is to try to demonstrate coherence as operative within the Mahābhārata text itself. As everyone knows, there is a long and to many thankless tradition of scholarship in this vein, to which the names of Joseph Dahlmann (1895), Madeleine Biardeau (especially 2002), and a late-career book by V.S. Sukthankar (1957) can be cited as leading entries, and to which, since about 1992, I myself have tried to make varied supportive contributions. I am, however, the only one of these scholars to view the Critical Edition as having a more successful outcome in uncovering an archetype than even its editors, including Sukthankar, could perceive. The other approach, which Biardeau began to take up mainly in her later works, but which did not so much preoccupy Dahlmann or Sukthankar, is to try to determine—wherever possible by historical information, and otherwise, more precariously, of course, by intertextual considerations—the ante quem and post quem parameters by which it would be possible to hypothesize the time span during which the composition of this archetype would have been achieved, and with that, for it to have started to find readers and be disseminated.

Let me mention a few promising results of such inquiries, limiting myself for the moment to ones in which I have participated. Backed

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\(^1\) A short presentation of this chapter was included in a special panel on the benefits of interpreting the Mahābhārata “whole” at the September, 2009 14th World Sanskrit Conference in Kyoto, along with contributions by Vishwa Adluri, Joydeep Bagchee, Simon Brodbeck, and T. P. Mahadevan—each of whom I thank for our many spirited and profitable exchanges around this project. See now the essays by these authors, plus one by Fernando Wulff Alonso, in Adluri in press. An earlier short version was presented at the March, 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I thank Jason Neelis and Luis González-Reimann for their helpful comments on that version.
by a number of scholars, including Biardeau (2002), James Fitzgerald (2001), Nick Sutton (1997), and myself (1989, 2005b), there has emerged something of a consensus that the epic “as we have it” is post-Āśokan. Taking us further down in time, I have argued that the epic’s references to Činas probably make it younger than the reputation of the Chin Dynasty for unifying China, and that in combination with references to Hūṇas, Yavanas (Ionians or Greeks), Antioch, and Rome, we must posit that the epic poets were familiar with some of these people less by proximity or invasion than by familiarity with their “geographical and historical reputation[s]” and even their “foreign histories” (Hiltebeitel 2001a, 30–31). I am pleased that Michael Witzel regards this “lead” as worth following. Witzel proposes that we should “take a much closer look at the time frame around 150 B.C.E. as that of the first assembly of the text…probably carried out by a group of Brahmans who worked on earlier bardic materials” (2005, 67; cf. 53–56). On the other hand, at the ante quem end I have argued (2006c) that the Mahābhārata would have preexisted the first or second century dates ascribed to the kāvya poet Āśvaghoṣa, since he refers to Vyāsa and Vālmiki as precedent-setting poets for his Buddhacarita; he knows a Mahābhārata story with substories well enough to selectively allude to both; and he is especially attentive to usages of the terms svadharma, rājadharma, and mokṣadharma in ways that quite clearly allude to the Bhagavad Gītā and the Śāntiparvan. I also believe, with Biardeau (1999), that major insights emerge once we recognize that the Mahābhārata, and with it the Rāmopākhyāna, is earlier than the Rāmāyaṇa (see Hiltebeitel 2009). Since Āśvaghoṣa knew both epics and actually has enough poetic distance—which need not mean great temporal distance—to consider them bifocally, this would mean that we have some suggestive evidence for a position that a Mahābhārata archetype may be dated to some relatively short span from the period between circa 150 B.C.E. to the turn of the millennium—the dates I proposed in my book Rethinking the Mahābhārata (2001a, 18–21).

In this chapter, I will be working primarily within this second parameter-setting approach, with the goal not only of continuing to refine our intertextual parameters, but of taking us into historical considerations bearing on the very period I continue to propose. In so doing, I believe two questions—one, of the text’s historical setting; the other, of its claim to being itihāsa or “history”—gain new clarity once we lift the clouds of what may be called a perfect scholarly storm that has just brewed up and passed before our eyes.