The unique status of the KR as the only surviving Kakawin dating from the Central Javanese period has ensured its place in Indonesia’s cultural and literary history. A key item in the Sanskrit ‘repertory of cultural forms in the package of empire’ (Pollock 1996:199, 2006), the central place of the Rāmāyana tradition is evidenced in the richness of its multi-faceted representations. From its earliest renderings on palm leaf and stone, it served as a source of political, strategic and moral guidance for rulers and as the inspiration for generations of poets, artisans and performers.

On Bali, where the Rāmāyana’s significant stylistic and thematic influence has endured until the present, the Old Javanese Rāmāyana is regarded as the Ādi-Kakawin (Hooykaas 1957, 1958c; Robson 1972), that is, as both the first Kakawin and as the preeminent example of the Kakawin genre.¹ For over a millennium, the Old Javanese KR has remained a powerful force in the cultural, literary and religious life of the Balinese. Nevertheless, just as elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, on Bali too, there is no single ‘Rāmāyana’ but instead a number of distinct literary, visual and performing arts representations that have each contributed to the creativity that underpins the vitality of Rāmāyaṇa traditions broadly considered.

This chapter will provide a regional perspective on Kakawins from Bali that are linked to this enduring Rāmāyana tradition. This survey will take us far from the origins of the KR in ninth-century Java, and even further from any consideration of the specific linguistic and stylistic influences of Sanskrit on Old Javanese. Instead, it will explore Kakawin representations of the Rāmāyaṇa story at the far end of the chain of transmission. Most of these Kakawin were composed from the late eighteenth century onwards although the earliest

¹ Since Indian tradition hails the Vālmiki Rāmāyana as the Ādikāvyya (Brockington 1998:1; Saran and Khanna 2004:1), this designation may well be less an indigenous category than a concept borrowed from Sanskrit literature, but it is, nonetheless, a designation that has been perpetuated by both Old Javanese Rāmāyana scholarship and local Balinese tradition alike.
examples may date from the sixteenth century. Because of the crucial role that Balinese manuscript traditions have played in the development and preservation of Old Javanese literature more generally, it will also touch on the continuities that can be traced in the adaptation and evolution of textual knowledge shared between Java and Bali over the longer term.

A new Rāmāyaṇa

In 2003, the literary achievements of I Wayan Pamit (b. 1935), a respected and well-known author and a strong proponent and supporter of Balinese culture, language and traditional literature, were recognized with the conferral of the provincial-level ‘Dharma Kusuma’ award. One year earlier, I Wayan Pamit had published four of his original Kakawin compositions: the two-volume Kakawin Rāwaṇa, the Nīla Candra, the Candra Bhuwana and the Candra Bhairawa (Pamit 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d). In 2006, he was again recognized, this time as one of Bali’s six most prominent literary figures, in the inaugural round of the provincial ‘Widya Pataka’ awards. Now in his 70s, I Wayan Pamit, a former school teacher, has been involved in classical Balinese literature as an observer, composer and performer since he was seven years old. The Kakawin Rāwaṇa details Rāwaṇa’s entire life from his birth to his death. It is a voluminous work of 117 cantos, composed in Old Javanese; with its accompanying Balinese gloss (tègès) printed on each facing page, it stretches to over 400 pages. He had completed this work several years earlier but had been unable to find a publisher until 2002. Wayan Pamit’s focus on the character of the archetypal villain, Rāwaṇa, rather than on the quintessential hero, Rāma, attracted interest and some local criticism. In an interview with Darma Putra for the Bali Post on 7 September 2003,² Wayan Pamit claimed that Rāwaṇa’s character provided more than ample scope for the didactic exposition of the core moral and social values he wished to highlight for contemporary Balinese. He noted that his composition was based on his reading of a wide variety of lontar and other sources, including the Bhagavadgītā and Nītiśāstra and, it would seem, in particular the Uttarakāṇḍa (UtK), as we will explore in more detail below.

In his interest in the didactic possibilities of the Rāmāyaṇa story, Wayan Pamit proves himself a worthy twenty-first century heir to one of the long-standing, characteristic aims of Kakawin composition, that is, to provide edifying, morally-uplifting teachings on right conduct (dharma) to individuals and ‘a sort of pattern for princes’ (Friederich 1959:17) for those who govern.