BRHATKATHĀ STUDIES: THE TAMIL VERSION OF THE BRHATKATHĀ

The Brhatkathā, 'The Great Romance', of Guṇāḍhya is one of the lost masterpieces of classical Indian literature. Once a rival to the Epics for size and renown, it now survives only in five versions - three in Sanskrit, Brhatkathāślokasamgraha of Budhasvāmin, Brhatkathāmanjarī of Kṣemendra, and Kathāsaratīsagara of Somadeva; one in Prakrit, Vasudevahimdi of Saṅghadāsagānī; and one in Old Tamil, Koṅkuvēḻḷu's Peruṅkatai. The Sanskrit and Prakrit versions have been fortunate for the scholarly attention they have attracted, notably from Félix Lacôte and Ludwig Alsdorf, but the Tamil version has excited little interest, perhaps because of the work's forbidding length and style, perhaps because scholars and translators have been more drawn to the greater aesthetic rewards offered by the grand achievements of the earlier Sangam age. My own interest is not Peruṅkatai as such but what it can tell us about the lost Brhatkathā.

But how do we know that Peruṅkatai is a version of the lost Brhatkathā? Not from any explicit reference within the text because Koṅkuvēḻḷu is quite silent about his source or sources. A colophon to the third book simply calls the text koṅkuvēṇmakkatai, 'the Great Romance of Koṅkuvēḷ', mā being synonymous with perum 'great'. The title Peruṅkatai itself (perum = brhat; katai = katha) appears to be the invention of later scholars, perhaps of scholars who recognized its kinship with the Brhathkathā and gave it an appropriate (though Tamilized) title. To Tamil literary tradition, in fact, the work is sometimes known under another title: Utayan_an katai, 'Udayana's Story'. We shall see why shortly. No, it is external evidence that tells us Peruṅkatai is a version of the Brhatkathā. Scholars have long recognized that the Sanskrit and Prakrit works cited above have so much in common that they must be related in one of two ways. Either they are derived from one or another of their own rank or they all derive from a common ur-text which has been the source of each and all. From all evidence the latter premise is the more likely. To read Peruṅkatai then after having read the Sanskrit and Prakrit versions is to recognize that Peruṅkatai is (a) yet another telling of the story found in the Sanskrit and Prakrit works, and (b) a text in such detailed agreement with the other versions that it must itself be a fifth version of the same ur-text. Still, might not Peruṅkatai simply be a redaction of one of the other four versions of the Brhatkathā? No, this is unlikely for two reasons. First, Kathāsaratīsagara and Brhatkathāmanjarī are of the eleventh century and Peruṅkatai probably earlier, so they could not possibly be its source. Second, though Brhatkathāślokasamgraha and

*Title of the article as it appears in the source.*
Vasudevahiriṇḍi are probably earlier than the Tamil version, they could not be the source of Perūṅkatai for this simple reason: they contain little or no story of Udayana⁴, while Perūṅkatai has the longest and most detailed treatment of Udayana's story to be found in any version.

Perūṅkatai is immense — more than sixteen thousand lines — and still the text is incomplete. According to U. V. Cāminātaiyar's text-edition⁵, considerable portions of the beginning and end of the text have been lost as well as fragments of the middle books. What survives is contained in five major kāṇṭams, or books — Uṇcaī, Ilavāṇa, Makata, Vattava, and Naravāṇa — the first three named for their setting (Ujjayinī, Lāvāṇaka, and Magadha), the last two respectively for Udayana the Vatsa (= Vattavan, the king of the province of Vatsa) and Prince Naravāhana (datta). Each kāṇṭam is further subdivided into kāṭais (gāthā), or chapters, ninety-nine kāṭais being present in the extant text. The beginning of the first kāṇṭam lacks thirty-one kāṭais and part of its thirty-second. The third kāṇṭam is missing a whole kāṭai and parts of four others. And the last extant kāṇṭam breaks off in the course of its ninth kāṭai.

The story unfolds in chronological telling through the eyes of an omniscient, third-person narrator — first the history of Udayana, King of the Vatsas, then that of Prince Naravāhanadatta, his son. Where the extant texts begins we find King Udayana captive of King Pradyota in Ujjayinī, lured there for refusing Pradyota tribute. Udayana meets Pradyota's daughter, Princess Vāsavadattā, and the pair fall in love, introducing the first of two major themes — Udayana's consuming passion for Vāsavadattā, a love which will lead him even to slight his royal duties. With the assistance of Udayana's minister Yaugandharāyana, who has been working underground, Udayana flees Ujjayinī with Vāsavadattā and the pair reach safety in Jayanti town after a long trek, ending the kāṇṭam. A simple enough story, one could say, but what I have summarized in just three sentences occupies more than five thousand lines of Tamil text and was once even longer by thirty-one chapters! Obviously the bulk of the text does not advance the narrative at all but rather embellishes, often in the densest possible way, upon settings, themes, and events, upon Jaina dogma and Tamil poetic conventions, upon every character, every scene, and every act. Indeed, it is this forbidding prolixity, prolix by modern tastes at least, which doubtless explains Perūṅkatai's lack of popularity (in modern times, at any rate).

The second kāṇṭam (of 3299 lines), Ilavāṇa (Lāvāṇaka), opens with the marriage of Udayana and Vāsavadattā. But elsewhere Udayana's ministers have quite a different matter on their minds. They have learned that during Udayana's long absence — first in Ujjayinī and now in Jayanti — the Pañcāla king Āruṇi has captured Kauśāmbi, Udayana's capital. Udayana, however, seems quite unconcerned, preoccupied instead with his new bride Vāsavadattā. And so most of this kāṇṭam is