TOWARDS A CRITICAL EDITION OF
THE SKANDAPURĀṆA

It has long been doubted whether the well-known Skandapurāṇa ever formed a single textual whole before it was published as such by the Venkatesvara Press in AD 1910. No manuscripts are known that contain what could be considered as 'the complete Skandapurāṇa,' at least not one that conforms reasonably with the printed editions, which consist of a collection of khandas. However, our knowledge of the early history of a text called Skandapurāṇa has been revolutionized by a large, though incomplete, Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript,1 the importance of which was already realized by Haraprasad Shastri, but which, for one reason or another, so far has escaped serious attention of western Purāṇa scholars. We refer to this MS as S1.

This MS was used by Bhaṭṭarāiī for his edition of the text under the title of Skandapurinasya Ambikākhaṇḍaḥ (Kathmandu 1988). It is to Bhaṭṭarāiī's credit to have noted the existence of two other Nepalese palm-leaf manuscripts of this text,2 of an age comparable to S1, and to have provided us with the editio princeps. However, a closer look at his edition reveals serious shortcomings, which makes the edition unsatisfactory in many respects. For that reason a team (consisting of the present authors) has been formed at the Institute of Indian Studies (University of Groningen) to prepare a critical edition of this oldest version of the Skandapurāṇa (hereafter SP), using the three palm-leaf MSS from the National Archives.

A later recension of this text refers to itself as the Ambikākhaṇḍa of the Skandapurāṇa. We have so far collected four MSS of this recension, one of which was also used by Bhaṭṭarāiī, hence the title of his edition.3 A third recension, calling itself Revākhanda of the Skandapurāṇa (entirely different from the printed Revākhanda), is known to us from a MS in the Asiatic Society in Calcutta.4 This MS differs significantly from the Ambikākhanda and in some respects is closer to the Nepalese palm-leaf, or S recension. It proves to be invaluable for establishing the critical text, especially when the palm-leaf MSS fail and we otherwise would have been dependent on the A MSS, as indeed Bhaṭṭarāiī was, viz., on A3. Neither the palm-leaf recension, nor the Ambika and Revā recensions of this text have much in common with the printed Skandapurāṇa as far as we have been able to ascertain. This may be illustrated by three chapters dealing with Vārāṇasī. These are

totally different from the Kāśikhaṇḍa, but one of them appears to be largely identical with a long passage in the Tīrthavivecanakāṇḍa of Lakṣmīdhara's Kṛtyakalpataru, who ascribes this quotation to an, until now unidentified, Skandapurāṇa (TVK pp. 36–45, 130–5 ≈ SP 29).

The palm-leaf manuscript S1 is in fact dated, as was first pointed out by M. Witzel in his On the Archetype of Patañjali’s Mahābhāṣya, in which he briefly refers to this very MS, though solely from the point of view of its palaeographical interest. Witzel (in: IIJ 29 (1986), 256 n. 9) reads the date as 252 and says that this is Mānadeva [= Aṃśūvarman] samvat, equivalent to AD 810. We read with Bhaṭṭarāṇī the date as 234 [Mānadeva samvat], which would indeed correspond to AD 810.5 It is the oldest dated Nepalese manuscript known to us, and probably the oldest surviving manuscript of a Puranic text.

The antiquity of this Nepalese manuscript and the fact — rightly emphasized by Shastri — that it refers to itself in the colophons simply as Skandapurāṇa, with no mention of khaṇḍas, already suggest that this text is particularly worthy of notice and study. Another source which casts light on its history is formed by citations from the Skandapurāṇa in early Nibandha works.

It seems that the practice of calling newly composed texts khaṇḍas of the Skandapurāṇa might have started in the 12th century. Lakṣmīdhara still only quotes from an undivided Skandapurāṇa, which can for the most part be identified with the text we are presently editing. On the authority of Ballālasena’s Dānasāgara (AD 1169–70) we know that in the 12th century three texts (khaṇḍas) circulated, which told the stories of Revā, Avanti and Paunḍra, and which were apparently assigned to the Skandapurāṇa.6 However, the ‘undivided’ Skandapurāṇa still well-known and extant; these were considered less authoritative and consequently Ballālasena preferred not to use them. Instead he quotes rather extensively in the Dānasāgara from the SP. Out of the 204 pādas quoted only four could not be traced.

The general pattern that arises from an investigation of the Nibandha literature with respect to some khaṇḍas is that, when such a khaṇḍa had only recently been composed, Nibandha authors were generally reluctant to endorse their claims of being part of the Skandapurāṇa. To avoid commitment they often quoted from the khaṇḍa by name without assigning it to the Skandapurāṇa, or they quoted verses from them assigning these to the Skandapurāṇa without mentioning that they actually had derived them from khaṇḍa-texts. From Hazra’s work it appears that not all of them occur in the printed editions. Hazra’s conjecture that these, at least partly, belonged to Purāṇas that have been lost or replaced has proved to be right in a