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Verses at the Court of the King: Shifts in the Historical Imagination of the Sanskrit Literary Tradition during the Second Millennium

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Abstract

This essay argues that the rise and circulation of large numbers of Sanskrit literary anthologies as well as story traditions about poets in the second millennium together index important changes in the 'author-function' within the Sanskrit literary tradition. While modern 'empirical authorship' and external referentiality in Sanskrit has long been deemed 'elusive'by Western scholarship, the new forms of literary production in the second millennium suggest a distinct new interest in authorship among wider literary communities. This new 'author-function' indexed a shift in the perceptions of literary production and the literary tradition itself. Focusing on the famous sixteenth-century work known as the Bhojaprabandha *as both an anthology as well as a storybook about poets, this essay further argues that the paradigmatic courts of kings like Vikramāditya and Bhoja (but particularly the latter), placed not in historical time but in an archaic temporality, became the* mise en scène *for the figure of the poet in the second-millennium literary imagination. They were courts where the finest poets of the tradition appeared and where their virtuosity could be savored and reflected upon by generations of readers.*

Keywords: literary anthology; authorship; Sanskrit literature; literary history; *Bhojaprabandha*; Bhoja of Dhārā

The proposition, once widely accepted, that Sanskrit literature went into decline after the twelfth century of Sanskrit court poetry, has been seriously revised and re-articulated by scholars working on Sanskrit literature in a variety of genres during the second, so-called 'vernacular', millennium.[1] Indeed, the premise of the workshop at which this paper was

[1]See the key interventions of Sheldon Pollock, 'The Death of Sanskrit', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, 2 (2001), pp. 392–426 and Jesse Knutson, *Into the Twilight of Sanskrit Court Poetry: The Sena Salon of Bengal and Beyond* (Berkeley, 2014), who both present nuanced accounts of the transformation of Sanskrit usage that accompanied the rise of vernacular literatures. For a critique of Pollock's position, see Yigal Bronner and David Shulman,

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presented was that Sanskrit in the era of the Delhi Sultanate had a varied and important history that has to a great extent been neglected. This paper will contribute to these discussions by attempting to connect two elements of second millennium Sanskrit literary culture in order to highlight a larger shift in the self-perception of the Sanskrit literary tradition during second millennium. The first is the rise to prominence of *subhāṣitasaṅgraha*s, or poetic anthologies—collections of short pithy verses on a variety of subjects, notable for their aptness, beauty, or with—which mark, I believe, a new way of thinking about and experiencing literature. While these anthologies were not unknown in earlier times, their variety, number, and importance greatly increase from the thirteenth century. The second is an unprecedented and marked interest in the biographies and careers of individual poets. This interest in stories about poets gains particular significance given the notable indifference to such themes in earlier times and is manifest in a variety of types of writing, from aesthetic treatises and commentaries to short quasi-biographical *prabandha* texts.

The impetus for this paper was prompted by attempts to understand the significance of perhaps the most influential literary work among the many associated with the life of the historical king Bhoja of Dhārā, the *Bhojaprabandha*, composed sometime in the sixteenth century by one Ballāla of Benares. This text, it may be argued, effectively falls into both categories of literature mentioned above. On the one hand, it is a narrative poem telling of stories about poets at the court of Bhoja, and on the other, because it contains a large number of verses that were likely drawn from and connected to existing anthologies, it is effectively a verse anthology encased in prose. The framing of this text, which has served as a delightful source of verses and narratives related to the poets of Sanskrit literature for the inheritors of the tradition itself, has not been accorded its proper significance by modern scholarship, which has instead viewed it as a largely worthless historical narrative filled with the wild chronological anachronisms.[2] In contrast, I hope to show that the *Bhojaprabandha*, and the literary tradition it embodies—that of the circulating *subhāṣita* and the narrativisation of poetic virtuosity—can tell us something very important about a shift in the temporal and social imagination of the Sanskrit literary tradition in the second millennium.

Sanskrit Authors and the Question of History

Writing the history of Sanskrit *kāvya* literature along modern historicist and chronological principles has been even more problematic than piecing together the succession of dynastic history in early India. Scholars have long complained of the sparse biographical and 'historical' information that the Sanskrit literary tradition has supplied for its own authors, making the establishment of both absolute and relative chronologies among works and authors an enduring problem for the field.[3] In some literary works and inscriptions we occasionally come across mention of a poet's father and grandfather, and literary patrons are sometimes mentioned, but in most cases the information provided is all too brief. The number of texts

'"A Cloud Turned Goose": Sanskrit in the Vernacular Millenium,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, 1 (2006), pp. 1–30.

[2]See the remarks of its translator, Louis Gray, *The Narrative of Bhoja (Bhojaprabandha)* (New Haven Conneticut, 1950) p. 2.

[3]See the comments of Siegfried Lienhard, 'A History of Classical Poetry: Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit', Jan Gonda, (ed.), *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 3, Fasc. 1 (Wiesbaden, 1984), pp. 51–52.

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whose authors can be placed in particular historical contexts remain, as numerous scholars have noted, strikingly limited. This phenomenon has been explained variously, from attribution to the 'impersonal, highly anonymous nature of *kāvya*' to its ideological tendency toward erasing its own immediacy in connection with its 'cosmopolitan' urges.[4]

This indifference to the 'empirical author' is mirrored by a parallel attitude toward the poetic tradition itself. We rarely find nothing but the most generic temporal consciousness on the part of authors about poets of the past. Poetic manuals starting in the seventh century identify 'styles' (*mārga*, *rīti*) of composition defined by a notional geography.[5] These styles, however, are not articulated by way of organising a corpus of writers, and are neither placed in time, nor populated by specific authors to constitute 'schools'. Instead they served as geographically marked styles that functioned as an evaluative nomenclature for teaching the principles of poetic composition.[6] There is occasional acknowledgement of past poets in the prologues to some Sanskrit dramas and prose works. These references seem to be by way of introducing the author of the work. In the opening lines of *Mālavikāgnimitra*, for example, Kālidāsa argues, through the mouth of the play's *sūtradhara* and his assistant, that the presentation of the play at the vernal festival, though 'new' (*nava*) and 'contemporary' (*vartamāna*), was not an affront to established, or old (*purāṇa*) 'poets' like Bhāsa, Saumillaka and Kaviputra.[7] Similarly, the verse prologue to Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* contains praises of Vyāsa, Haricandra, Sātavāhana, Pravarasena, Bhāsa, and Kālidāsa, presumably by way of paying homage to past poets at the commencement of his own work.[8] There is also reference in these contexts to stylistic traditions associated with the regions. We also have the occasional self-comparison to past poets, as when Ravikīrti, author of the famous seventh-century Aihole inscription, boasts of his poetic skill as "having attained the fame of Kālidāsa and Bhāravi", or the Hoysaḷa court poet Kālakalabha Sakalacakravartin, writing in the thirteenth century, names himself a 'latter day Bāṇa' (*abhinavabhaṭṭabāṇa*) and a 'Kālidāsa of the kali yuga' (*kalikālakālidāsa*).[9] The aggregate sum of such references, however, is paltry enough to suggest to modern critics a general apathy toward authorial aspects of the poetic tradition. This unhappy state of affairs is all the more remarkable, given the highly theorised and reflexive nature of Sanskrit literature, particularly as evidenced in the field of poetics, or *alaṃkāraśāstra*.

[4]Lienhard, *A History of Classical Poetry*, p. 51; Sheldon Pollock, 'The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300-1300 CE: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology', in Jan E. M. Houben (ed.), *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language* (New York, 1996), pp. 197–249.

[5]For a summary discussion of these geographical styles, prominent in Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin and Vāmana, see A. K. Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature* (New Delhi, 1989, 2nd edition), vol. 1, pp. 93–97, and more comprehensively, Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley, 2006), pp. 204–222.

[6]The imagination of regions in these styles was more notional and conceptual than empirical, a kind of spatialism within a cosmopolitan framework. On this point, see Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, pp. 221–222.

[7]*Mālavikāgnimitram*, (ed.) S. P. Pandit (Bombay, 1869), 1.2. Other authors like Murāri and Rājaśekhara introduce themselves in their prologues through praise verses put into the mouths of actors and/or directors in the preliminary conversations that precede the action of the plays. See Murāri's *Anārgharāghava*, (eds.), Durgaprasad Shastri and Wasudeve Laxman Pansikar (Bombay, 1937) 1.7+; and Rājaśekhara's *Karpūramañjarī*, (edited and translated) Sten Konow and Charles Lanman, (Cambridge, Mass., 1901) 1.10.

[8]Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, (ed.) P. V. Kane, (Delhi, 1986 repr.) Prologue, vv. 3-20.

[9]Aihole inscription see *Epigraphia Indica* 6 (1900-01), no. 1, p. 7. See *Gadyakarṇāmṛta of Sakalavidyācakravartin*, (ed.) S. S. Janaki, (Madras, 1981), p. 87.

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This absence of a concern for authorship would seem to accord well with the questioning of authorship in structuralist and post-structuralist criticism of the later twentieth century. In the 1960s and 70s French scholars like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault sought to index what they saw as the growing irrelevance of the figure of the author in critical scholarship, to both historicise its provenance and denaturalise its empirical certainty, but most importantly to move critical focus away from the author to structural concepts like discourse and discursive formation.[10] For Barthes, uses of the author-concept in Western literature and criticism always attempted to 'limit' and 'close' the unstable character of writing.[11] Foucault replaced the author with an 'author-function'—where "the function of the author is to characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society".[12] This work has provided the tools for later scholarship to understand authorship in a more historically nuanced fashion—where the absence of authorship, the first emergence of the author-function, processes of authorial ascription, narrativisation, and anthologisation around the life of the author—may all be seen not as more or less useful 'clues' to dating and reconstructing the lives of empirical authors along positivist lines, but as rhetorical devices that tell us about a society's relation to its discourses and pasts. Alexander Beecroft, for example, has argued that the figure of the author in early Greece and China formed a cipher for the discussion of problems relating to the production, distribution and consumption of literature.[13] Authorship thus becomes a kind of 'meta-language' about literature itself during a period of intense literary and social change.

Drawing on some of the insights of this scholarship, this essay will examine the development and proliferation of verse anthologies in the second millenium as well as traditions of stories about poets that seem to appear at roughly the same time. Special attention will be given to authorial ascription, citational practice, and what Beecroft has called 'scenes of authorship'—narrative episodes or fragments of episodes that purport to recount the performance or composition of a verbal art by a named poet.[14] It will then turn to a repository of these story cycles that I will call the 'Legend of Bhoja'—that evolved over centuries in different 'textual iterations' but which is most famously embodied today in the *Bhojaprabandha*, a work that is at once a story narrative and an anthology, in order to think further about relations between poetry, history and authorship in the second millennium.

Medieval Anthologies and Scholastic Culture

Though collections are as old as the processes of textual production itself in South Asia, and span the gamut of languages and genres, literary anthologies appear first not in Sanskrit, but

[10]See the now famous essays of Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London, 1970) 1977 reprint, pp. 142–148; Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in James Faubion, (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, vol. 2 (New York, 1969) reprint 1998, pp. 205–222.

[11]Barthes, p. 147.

[12]Foucault, p. 211.

[13]Alexander Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China: Patterns of Literary Circulation* (Cambridge, 2010).

[14]Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity*, pp. 1. 18–20.

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in Prakrit, Pali, and Tamil, sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era.[15] They were composed of numbers of single-verse poems, known as *gāthā* in Prakrit and *taṉippāṭal* in Tamil, that each were syntactically, semantically, and metrically complete within themselves, and which captured some poetic scene or ethical truism. When literary anthologies began to appear in the Sanskrit language, tentatively in the latter half of the first millennium, and then in greater numbers after 1100, they similarly contained large numbers of autonomous, stand-alone verses, known in Sanskrit as *subhāṣita* (also *sūkti* or *cāṭu*).

The stand-alone verses of the later anthologies have been problematic for modern textual criticism. Often plagued by problems of authentication and attribution, highly mobile and difficult to attest, the verses of the anthologies are in a sense emblematic of Sanskrit's supposedly 'ahistorical' impulse, indicating a blithe indifference on the part of the compilers and users of anthologies toward the demands of modern 'empirical' authorship. The modern scholarship around this literature has in a sense reinforced this image by understanding them as part of a diffuse oral tradition. Ludwik Sterbach, whose many works on *subhāṣita*s and anthologies helped establish their importance in the field of Sanskrit literature, concluded that their origin lay in the need to impart wisdom and practical guidance to future generations through easily remembered verses that pithily and beautifully captured the spirit of some moral advice.[16] Ultimately, they "belonged to the mass of oral tradition; they were not assembled in any collections but floated freely in order to be quoted at any appropriate occasion by Indian intellectuals".[17] More recently, and significantly, Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman have argued that these verses, echoing across the 'interstices' of the Indic textual traditions, formed the core of an 'oral culture' that was the 'life-breath' of Sanskrit literature in South Asia.[18] Narayana Rao and Shulman interpret the verses as expressing the organic 'life' of poetry in South Asia, contrasting this tradition of 'remembered' poetry to the 'recorded' verses of the literate tradition, apparently more amenable to the modern 'text-critical' obsession with "chronology, textual authority and historicity".[19]

Both Sternbach's notion of oral folk wisdom and Shulman and Narayana Rao's concept of 'oral remembered poetry' are in many respects welcome advancements on previous conceptualisations of this genre, and help us rethink some aspects of ethical and literary culture in premodern India as partly dialogical in nature.[20] Yet, both interpretations tend to valorise and reify the orality of the stand-alone verse and, in the case of Shulman and Narayana Rao, celebrate its supposed ahistorical features, making it a kind of antipode to modern text-critical sensibility. These interpretations ignore the fact that the 'orality' of the *subhāṣita*

[15]On the *gāthā* and anthology in Prakrit see Andrew Ollett, *The Language of the Snakes: Sanskrit Prakrit and the Language Order of Premodern India* (Berkeley, 2017), pp. 102–110. On the composition and chronology of the Tamil anthologies, see Eva Wilden, 'Towards an Internal Chronology of the Old Caṅkam Literature or How to Trace the Laws of a Poetic Universe', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 46 (2002), p. 127 and Wilden, *Manuscript, Print and Memory: Relics of the Caṅkam in Tamilnadu* (Berlin, 2014) p. 10, n20.

[16]For his general overviews of this literature, see Ludwik Sternbach, 'Subhāṣita, Gnomic and Didactic Literature', Jan Gonda, (ed.) *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 4, fasc. 1, (Wiesbaden, 1974).

[17]Sternbach, *Gnomic and Didactic Literature*, p. 1.

[18]Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *A Poem at the Right Moment: Remembered Verses from Premodern South India* (Berkeley, 1998).

[19]Narayana Rao and Shulman, *Poem at the Right Moment*, p. 9.

[20]On the ethical aspects of subhāṣita anthologies, see Daud Ali 'The Subhāṣita as an Ethical Artifact', in Daud Ali and Anand Pandian, (eds.), *Ethical Life in South Asia* (Bloomington, 2010), pp. 21–42.

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was not prior to (in the case of Sternbach) or separate and autonomous from (in the case of Shulman and Narayana Rao) but intimately connected to literate, courtly and scholastic settings, particularly as evidenced by the textual environment of the anthologies from which the *subhāṣita* is drawn.[21]

Judging from the sources that preserve them, circulating stand-alone literary and ethical verses in Sanskrit enjoyed widespread proliferation and collection in the second millennium, particularly after 1100. They appeared in didactic narrative and *kathā* literature, with large numbers of them 'accreting' to these texts through the hands of scribes and copyists, from generation to generation, as Sternbach has shown in his analysis of the verse portions of the *kathā* literature.[22] But mostly, they continued to be assembled in anthologies in ever greater numbers, following the precedent set by the Prakrit and Tamil anthologies compilers nearly a millennium earlier. *Alaṃkāraśāstrin*s from as early as Daṇḍin use terms to make distinctions between different types of anthology—in terms of uniformity or diversity in subject matter or authorship—though it is not clear whether compilers themselves always recognised these distinctions.[23] The trend in the second millennium was toward large compendia comprised of verses by many authors organised under an increasingly standard set of diverse *topoi*. The names of later Sanskrit anthologies often invoke the idea of a jewelbox, treasury, necklace or ocean, in their titles, with the suggested analogy that the poems assembled within them were gems. These anthologies, which begin to appear in Sanskrit in considerable numbers from the twelfth century, circulated widely and were among the most productive forms of literature in the second millennium CE. The most prominent among these included the *Subhāṣitaratnakośa* of Vidyākara (1105 CE), the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* of Śrīdharadāsa (1205 CE), the *Sūktimuktāvalī* of Bhagadatta Jalhaṇa (1258 CE), the *Śārṅgadhārapaddhati* of Śārṅgadhara (1353 CE), and the *Subhāṣitāvalī* of Vallabhadeva (after the 15th C.), to which Sternbach has added a large number of lesser known anthologies. Our understanding of the nature and extent of anthologies in the second millennium is preliminary at best, with scores of anthologies remaining unpublished.[24] The corpus of published anthologies today forms a major repository of thousands of independent verses, forming the chief conduit into modern times of what Sternbach recognised as a vast world of "less known Sanskrit authors whose poems were lost".[25]

These anthologies may be distinguished from earlier collections on several grounds. Their sheer number and their size—some containing thousands of verses and having various recensions—make them a formidable genre of literary production. Their internal arrangement

[21]For further outline of this line of criticism, see Daud Ali, 'Review of Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *A Poem at the Right Moment: Remembered Verses from Premodern South India,*' in *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, 1 (1999), pp. 246–247.

[22]Sternbach shows that different recensions of the same *kathā* texts differed not only in their narrative arrangement but also were vastly divergent in their stanzaic portions. Moreover, later versions and recensions contain greater numbers of accreted *subhāṣita*s, obviously included by generations of compilers, copyists and scribes. See Ludwik Sternbach, *The Kāvya Portions of the Kathā Literature—An Analysis* (Delhi, 1971), vol. 1, p. 27, *et passim*.

[23]See the discussion in Ollett, *Language of Snakes* pp. 103–104.

[24]For a general review, see Ludwik Sternbach, 'Subhāṣita-Saṃgraha-s: 'A Forgotten Chapter in the Histories of Sanskrit Literature,' *Indologica Taurinensia* 1 (1973), pp. 169–255. More critically, see Andrew Ollett, *Language of the Snakes*, pp. 102–110, and Jesse Knutson, 'Embedded Poets: The Birth of the Anthology and the Social Life of Sanskrit Kāvya', *Biblio* (March-April 2006), pp. 22–23.

[25]Sternbach, *Subhāṣita, Gnomic and Didactic Literature*, p. 6.

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gained greater specificity with certain thematic rubrics becoming stereotyped and widespread. These included long standing traditional subjects relating to the ethical and practical dimensions of what might be called *nīti*, or public political conduct for educated people (the praise of virtues and warning against vices); pithy maxims on courtly figures like scribes, misers and courtesans; and specimens of poetic and descriptive virtuosity. To the extent that these anthologies formed repositories of both literary virtuosity and ethical/practical knowledge, their proliferation can be said to mark a distinctive collocation of the practice of literature with the acquisition, display and consideration of distinctive ethical styles. The link between worldly knowledge and the dialogical performance of memorising, reciting and exchanging poetry, was made explicit in the anthologies themselves by the near ubiquitous inclusion and priority that was given to thematic rubrics related to poetry—including 'the praise of poetry', 'the praise of good poets', 'the censure of bad poets' and the like.

A distinctive feature of these anthologies is that many of their compilers identify the authors of the different verses they anthologised—usually by naming the poet in the sixth (genitive) case. Earlier anthologies in Sanskrit had mostly either been attributed to a single author or had been composed of anonymous verses. The shift toward naming authors is hardly ubiquitous, but pronounced nevertheless. Many anthologies provide a substantial number of ascriptions both to authors and works. Among the more important anthologies, Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnakośa* names 233 poets, Śārṅgadhara's *Śārṅgadharapaddhati* 282, Jalhaṇa's *Suktimuktāvalī* records 240 and Śrīdharadāsa's *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* includes 485 attributions.[26] Together the anthologies preserve the names of hundreds of poets, some well-known as authors of longer works, others minor or obscure, known from the anthologies alone. The number of identities preserved in the anthologies was vast enough to prompt Ludwik Sternbach to compile a two-volume encyclopedia of their names.[27] An important scholarly task, still in its infancy, is the cross-referencing and authentification of these poems in order to establish the *corpora* of lesser known poets and the *apocrypha* of established poets.[28] But as Sternbach has noted, many verses in the collections were wrongly ascribed, attributed to famous authors unlikely to have actually composed them, or inconsistently assigned to various poets by compilers and scribes.[29]

Such tasks—and the substantial obstacles that accompany them—may be said to pertain to what was earlier designated in this essay 'empirical authorship'. Yet the rise of ascriptions also indexes what Foucault called a transformation of the 'author-function'—the intellectual and discursive work that the *figure* of the author performs. In this sense, citations do not so much 'uncover' the identities particular authors as to extrude the figure of the author into the literary world. The anthologies of the second millennium both presupposed and partly constituted a wider literary *imaginaire*: the idea of a vast multitude of authors that constituted a

[26]Sternbach, *Subhāṣita, Gnomic and Didactic Literature*, pp. 16–18.

[27]Ludwik Sternbach, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Poets Quoted in Sanskrit Anthologies and Inscriptions*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1978).

[28]In addition to Sternbach's *Descriptive Catalogue*, see the early cross-listing of authors in several anthologies, by Har Dutt Sharma, 'An Analysis of the Authorities Cited in the *Śārṅgadharapaddhati*,' *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 18, 1 (1936–37), pp. 77–84. For studies of single authors cited in the anthologies, see S. C. Banerji, *Kālidāsa Apocrypha* (Varanasi, 1989), pp. 125–144 and L. Sternbach, *Unknown Verses Attributed to Kṣemendra* (Lucknow, 1979).

[29]Sternbach, *Subhāṣita, Gnomic and Didactic Literature*, pp. 8–9.

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'host' or 'circle' of poets. For many anthologists, the author-function seems to have been as important as the identities of individual authors. Authorless or anonymous verses are attributed to a generic 'someone' (*kasyāpi*), emphasizing the idea of the author as such. Overall, the anthologies present us with a galaxy of poets—some distinct, others indistinct—that were viewed as a vast ocean or repository for the anthologist, a 'tradition' in Eliot's sense.

This new authorial interest may in part proceed from an older culture of citation, evident in the tradition of commentaries and poetics. Manuals on poetics, from their appearance in the latter half of the first millennium, used 'examples' (*dṛṣṭānta*) to illustrate types of literary devices and merits and faults in poetic style. Yet early poeticians like Daṇḍin and Bhāmaha do not ascribe authors to their examples.[30] At least some later *alaṃkāra* authors, however, like Kṣemendra and Bhoja (both of the eleventh century), include mention of the names of either works or authors. Commentaries on belletristic works, which were based on the already existing traditions of śāstric learning, and which may date as early as the seventh century (but are only extant from the tenth century) proliferate in great numbers after the thirteenth century, and also quote authorities—often partially—though they typically cite *śāstra*s and epics rather than poetic works.[31] As Sheldon Pollock has noted, the format of these commentaries mimicked and memorialised an oral/literate pedagogical context—their growth thus suggesting a new relationship between pedagogy, recall and writing in the production and consumption of literature.[32]

The increasing prevalence of poetical treatises and commentaries, on the one hand, and anthologies with large numbers of collected individual verses, on the other, and the appearance of increasing numbers of named authors in both, points to the formation of a new literary culture that grew up at courts and literary salons from the turn of the millennium, and flourished in the second millennium. What seems to have been crucial to this literary culture —in terms of practice and modes of literary experience—was the memorisation, recollection, allusion, and citation of verses and verse clusters in the context of oral-literate settings, whether scholastic or courtly. Referential practices—citing poems and authors—became an increasingly important activity, but not in the manner of philological criticism to produce an 'author' as an empirical object fixed in time and space.[33] Instead, citational practice served the task of noting distinction and providing exemplars in an emergent literary order, one that presupposed the idea of something like a 'tradition' in the Eliotian sense. The 'stylistic traditions' marked by regional difference (*mārga/riti*) found in earlier manuals on poetics, which had served as guides for poets, were criticised and sidelined by more complex theories of the literary essence and guidelines for composition. At the same a host of named poets appeared

[30]Neither Daṇḍin's *Kāvyādarśa* nor Bhāmaha's *Kāvyālaṅkāra*, both of which provide numerous *dṛṣṭānta*, offer any authorial ascriptions. Scholars have identified a verse of Bhavabhūti in Vāmana's auto commentary, but it also lacks any ascription.

[31]For a review of the evidence of early commentaries on belletristic writing, see Goodall and Isaacson, 'Introduction,' *The Raghupañcikā of Vallabhadeva, being the Earliest Commentary on the Raghuvaṃśa of Kālidāsa* (Groningen, 2003), pp. xv-xix.

[32]See the remarks of Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, p. 83.

[33]Some have characterised this literary culture as 'philological' in nature, but a 'philology' that operated by compositional, citational and authorial principles so different from those that came to characterise modern textual criticism and philology of the nineteenth century that any comparison would seem more instructive by contrast than similarity. For a thoughtful attempt at mobilising the term to discuss medieval Indian textual cultures, see Whitney Cox, *Modes of Philology in Medeival South India* (Leiden, 2017) especially pp. 1–10; 40–43; 157–169.

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to populate the literary atmosphere, conceived of as a circle, or host of poets. It is not that by the second millennium there had been a large number of poets, but rather the emergence of a clear perception or *idea* of there being a multitude of poets had become an increasing part of the self-perception of the literary tradition and consequently was built into poetic practice about making distinctions among poets based on literary virtuoisty. This, I would argue, formed the backdrop of the often thematised *topoi* in *subhāṣita* anthologies of the 'praise of [good] poets' and 'censure of poor poets'.[34]

Moreover, we find particular verses in the anthologies praising the eminence of particular poets (and poems). A typical example, taken from Jalhaṇa's anthology, runs "What is the point of lute's twang or the bees' buzzing, or of the tinkling of Cupid's weapons or the sighs of young women, if the words of the good poet Chittapa, lovely like the fluid released from the lobes of Ganapati, attendants of ambrosial delight, enter the hollow of the ear?"[35] Such verses, as we saw above, were not unknown in earlier times.[36] Yet by the time of their appearance in second millennium anthologies, however, it is clear that such verses had both multiplied exponentially and taken on lives of their own, circulating independently and widely among various audiences. As we shall see, the 'author-function' of such verses, as well as the ascribed verses of the anthologies themselves was in part to facilitate, as both repositories of exemplars that might be cited in discourse but also as collections of criteria and judgments about poetry in general and about particular poets (*kaviprasaṃsā, kukavinindā, viśeṣakavikāvyaprasaṃsā* etc.), the continual comparison of different authors on the grounds of literary faults and merits.

The Lives of Poets

Alongside the growth of interest in the poet as a generic and named figure in scholastic literary culture—as indexed by practices of commentary, citation, and anthologisation—was the crystallisation of a tradition of anecdotes and narratives about certain poets. These anecdotes are distinct from the geneaological or narrative information occasionally included by poets in their own works (like Bāṇa's elaborate description of his own lineage in *Harṣacarita* or Somendra's more prosaic account of his father Kṣemendra's lineage in the *Avadānakalpalatā*). They are rather often episodic in nature. Scholars of Sanskrit literature have traditionally been suspicious of such unattested and potentially fabricated anecdotes, and only selectively admitted their details into the biographies of 'empirical' authors.[37] These narratives are in fact not, strictly speaking, 'biographical' narratives at all, in either the *carita* or *vaṃśa* modes, but rather anecdotes that formed the *mise en scène* for the often extemporaneous

[34]Anthologists like Vidyākara, Jalhaṇa and Śārṅgadhara include topics like *subhāṣitapraśaṃsā, sāmānyakavikāvyapraśaṃsā, viśeṣakavikāvyapraśaṃsā*, and *kukavi*[*nindā*].

[35]*Sūktimuktāvalī* 4.104: *vīṇākvaṇitena kim madhukarījhaṃkāritenāpi kim, kandarpāyudhaśiñjitena taruṇīhuṃkāritenāpi kim / śīmacchittpasatkaver yadi vaco herambakumbhasthalīmuktāmbhassubhagaṃ sudhāsahacaraṃ karṇodaraṃ gahate //*.

[36]See, for example, Bāṇa's praise of various poets in the prologue to his *Harṣacarita*. Also note the remarks of Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyākara's "Treasury"*, pp. 312–313.

[37]Beecroft has called this approach, the 'biographical fallacy'. See Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China*, p. 2.

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composition of an anthologised verse, more akin to what Beecroft has called 'scenes of authorship'.[38]

These stories seem to have developed as an integral part of poetic culture in the second millennium and circulated widely in complete or partial form in literary circles, being used as they were needed. In the case of one important poet, Śrīharṣa, the careful work of Deven Patel has revealed that the first stories and anecdotes related to the poet and his life seem to appear in commentarial prefaces to the *Naiṣadhīya* as early as the thirteenth century.[39] Similar origins may be found with anecdotes of other poets.[40] Such narratives appear almost simultaneously in a very different sort of literature: Śvetāmbara Jain biographical narratives known as *prabandha*s or *carita*s, written and compiled by Jain monks in Gujarat. The earliest of these, the *Prabhāvakacarita*, dated to CE 1277, contains narratives recounting the careers of the Paramāra court poet Dhanapāla and his brother Śobhana and the rivalry between Bāṇa and Mayūra at the court of Harṣa.[41] Similar story anthologies of the fourteenth century like Merutuṅga's *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* (CE 1304), Rājaśekharasūri's *Prabandhakośa* (CE 1349) as well as the diverse fragmentary texts assembled in the modern compilation known as the *Purātana-prabandhasaṅgraha* elaborate on these stories and introduce new poets. Some poets like Śrīharṣa and Māgha form the subjects of discrete *prabandha*s, while others like, Bāṇa, Mayūra, Dhanapāla, Vararuci, and Rājaśekhara appear as characters in the *prabandha*s of royal figures.[42] That these stories were not limited to Jain contexts, however, is made clear by the appearance of stories of poets in eastern India by the beginning of the fifteenth century. The famous Maithili poet Vidyāpati includes a history of Śrīharṣa and stories of poets at Bhoja's court in his famous set of narratives on courtly ethics entitled *Puruṣaparīkṣā*. And a century later, Ballāla of Benares wrote his *Bhojaprabandha*, to which we shall return shortly.

Several features are notable about these stories. First, most involve some attendance at a royal court or interaction with a king. The *Prabhāvakacarita* places Bāṇa and Mayūra at the court of king Harṣa of Kanauj, and Dhanapāla at the court of the Paramāra kings, while the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* places these poets as well as others at the court of Paramāra king Bhoja. The *Prabandhakośa* places Śrīharṣa at the courts of Jayantacandra of Kāśī and the king of Kashmir. These courtly settings are important because they form the narrative backdrop for vignettes depicting the interactions between the poet and other courtiers, learned men, and the king himself. Second, the stories typically revolve around scholarly and poetical rivalry. The protagonist's goal is to attain the deserved recognition of the royal patron by defeating or excelling rival poets and scholars of the court. Śrīharṣa, for example, vows to avenge his father's humiliation in philosophical debate at the hands of another court scholar. The stories are thus often replete with disputations, debates, and public poetic contests like spontaneous compositions and verse-completion riddles (*samasyāpūraṇa*). Third, as Phyllis

[38]Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China*, p. 1n.2, pp. 2–4.

[39]Deven Patel, *Text to Tradition: The Naiṣadhīya and Literary Community in South Asia* (New York, 2014), pp. 155–158.

[40]For Kālidāsa, see note 57 below.

[41]*Prabhāvakacarita*, (ed.) Jina Vijaya Muni, (Ahmedabad, 1940) 12.41-120; 17.1ff.

[42]Śrīharṣa is included in the Rajaśekharasūri's *Prabandhakośa*, while Māgha in the manuscript known as the *Āśarājādiprabandha* (ms. BR), of uncertain date, collected in the *Purātanaprabandhasaṅgraha*. Many of the other poets appear in the Bhoja and Bhīma *prabandha*s.

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Granoff has pointed out in her analyses of these stories, the protagonist and victorious poet usually possesses a near miraculous poetic genius, often attained through devotion to and favour from Sarasvatī, goddess of learning, and displayed through some poetic feat of great proportions.[43] A fourth and significant feature of these stories is that they include verses—*subhāṣita*s—put into the mouths of the protagonists and their rivals, often to demonstrate the literary ingenuity and prowess of the poet in question. *Subhāṣita* verses were not uncommon in earlier *kathā* works, where they were cited by characters from the storehouse of anonymous proverbial wisdom to make arguments about conduct and policy, typically prefaced by phrases such as 'it is said' (*uktam*). In the stories about poets, however, verses are for the most part represented as the spontaneous or premeditated creations of the poets who utter them.

It is clear that even these longer stories do not amount to 'biographies' in the modern sense, just as the *prabandha*s themselves are not what we think of as 'history'. Granoff prefers instead to see them as a kind of 'religious literature' that portrays the poet according to a single paradigmatic ideal.[44] The poets, possessed of unique literary powers in part through their devotion to Sarasvatī, are able to perform extraordinary feats of memory and stunning displays of rapid, extemporaneous literary composition. They are also often moral teachers, chastising the pride of their patrons in the manner of later medieval figures like Birbal and Tenali Raman. Granoff points out that the biographies also intersect with discourses on poetics and were at least partially concerned with the question of "what is good poetry and what kind of person could write it?"[45] Deven Patel's study of the Śrīharṣa stories makes this point even more emphatically. Drawing on B. Sandesera and Naryana Rao, he argues that the Śrīharṣa legends preserve what must have been oral traditions that were passed on between teacher and student and performed a literary critical function.[46] Indeed, Patel's larger point is that the legends around Śrīharṣa and his *Naiṣadhīya* were partly connected to understanding the poem's place among other works and authors that were being read in scholastic contexts. It is perhaps no coincidence then, that it is sometime in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when we see both a proliferation of anthologies of different poets and the elaboration of story traditions about poets, that we also encounter what seem to be the first discussions about 'canon' in Sanskrit literature through debates about which poems constitute 'the five great *mahākāvya*s' (*pañcamahākāvya*).[47]

The story narratives of poets, then, would seem to connect to processes of literary anthologisation which were expanding at approximately the same time. They were, moreover, paralleled in the other major cosmopolitan literary language to emerge in South Asia at the time. The intimate connection between authorship and anthologisation appears in the

[43]See Phyllis Granoff, 'Sarasvatī's Sons: Biographies of Poets in Medieval India,' *Asiatische Studien* 49 (1995), pp. 351–376.

[44]Granoff, 'Sarasvatī's Sons,' p. 353.

[45]Granoff, 'Sarasvatī's Sons,' p. 354.

[46]Patel, *Text to Tradition*, p. 172. See also P. Sandesera, *Literary Circle of Mahāmātya Vāstupāla and its Contribution to Sanskrit Literature* (Bombay, 1953), and Narayana Rao, 'Mulitple Literary Cultures in Telugu: Court, Temple and Public,' in Sheldon Pollock, (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History* (Berkeley, 2003), pp. 383–436.

[47]See Patel, *Text to Tradition*, pp. 59–60.

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Persian literary culture of India in the thirteenth century. The *Lubāb al-Albāb*, composed in 1222 at the court of Sultan Qubacha in Uch, Sind, by Muhammad 'Aufī, was the first literary anthology in the Persian language to be composed 'anywhere'.[48] The text is structured as a *tazkirah* and although the first parts of the text were given to discussions of the meaning and significance of poetry, subsequent chapters present short biographical descriptions and select poetical compositions of kings, nobles, ministers and poets throughout the Persian speaking world from both earlier and contemporary times, including some 300 poets in all. Though the format and style of the Persian texts differ substantially from Sanskrit anthologies and biographies, the roughly contemporaenous interest in biography and anthologisation is significant and requires more research.

In the Sanskrit world, the connection between anthologies and poetic biographies was both structural and thematic. Formally, poetical biographies included *subhāṣita*s that were often also preserved in the anthologies. They also thematise, through their narratives, the use of *subhāṣita*s in literary culture, in which the stand-alone verse was often the favoured exemplar of poetic virtuosity. While the *prabandha*s and *carita*s clearly narrativise contexts for the use of *subhāṣita* in literary culture, it is not entirely clear how the stories themselves were read. Whether the admixture of narrative and verse should be considered a mnemonic device for the preservation of poetry or a poetic emphasis meant to reinforce key elements of the narrative is perhaps a moot point. What is clear, is that in the oral traditions of literary culture, verse and narrative became generally inseparable. It is very revealing that when Shulman and Narayana Rao attempt to present the culture of stand-alone verses that were kept in anthologies, they must inevitably rely on narrativisation in presenting the material. The narratives upon which they draw, some literary and some oral, make clear that the everyday 'experience' of the stand-alone verse happened through forms of storytelling. The anthologies were like the builder's toolkit. They were assimilated partly or wholly through memory but were deployed in piecemeal fashion, as the occasion demanded, rather than read or recited continuously like longer works. The stories thus have a twofold significance for us. On the one hand they show that poems were deployed in direct discourse through their depiction of the interactions of their characters. But more importantly, they provide narratives for imagining how to think about the literary legacies of the tradition's leading poets. The author-function of the anthologies and the 'scenes of authorship' included in narratives also facilitated ongoing discussion of the virtues and defects of particular poets.

Bhoja and the Poets

If the stories of poets referred to above typically take a royal court as their presumed context, then surely the most famous of royal courts was that of the Paramāra monarch, Bhoja, king of Dhārā (r. 1011–1055), and most of the stories of Sanskrit poets take place there.[49]

[48]See Muzaffar Alam, 'The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan', in Sheldon Pollock, (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley, 2003) p. 139 ff.

[49]Bhoja's life and court has been a perennial theme among nationalist era Indologists, historians, and intellectuals, but has seldom been subjected to scrutiny. An exception to this is the excellent article by Michael Willis, 'Dhār, Bhoja and Sarasvatī: from Indology to Political Mythology and Back,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, 1 (2012), pp. 129–153. This article forms part of a special issue on '*Medieval India and the Paramāras*' to which the current author also contributed.

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Historicising Bhoja's court, however, is beset with problems. Putting aside complaints about obvious historical anachronisms, it must be admitted that precious little survives that can be dependably assigned to the time of Bhoja himself that would help us reconstruct him as a patron and polymath. While it is clear that he had achieved some kind of reputation as a patron of disputants and scholars during his lifetime or shortly thereafter, it seems to be the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after the conquest of the Paramāra kingdom, that Bhoja entered into storybooks at the hands of Jain monks in Gujarat.[50]

One of the key features of the Bhoja cycles that emerges in the centuries following his death is a close association between Bhoja and the famed legendary king of yore, Vikramāditya. The history of Vikramāditya is too complex to enter into here, but suffice it to say that though the 'historical' Vikramāditya may be lost in obscurity (though references to him would seem to begin in the Gupta period), legends of Vikramāditya begin to emerge gradually in the latter half of the first millennium CE and were either already part of, or folded into the famous *Bṛhatkathā* tradition toward the end of this period, with his name being linked to a dating era (the Vikrama Saṃvat) from approximately the eighth century.[51] Stories about Vikramāditya, usually paired with a rival king Śalivāhana, appear in Sanskrit story texts like the ninth-century *Bṛhatkathāślokasaṃgraha* of Buddhasvāmin, probably put together in Nepal, and the *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī* of Kṣemendra and *Kathāsaritsāgara* of Somadeva, both composed in Kashmir in the eleventh century. And Vikramāditya appears from the outset in Jain *prabandha* literature of Western India.[52]

The rise of this tradition encouraged the court poets in the latter half of the second millennium to compare their patrons to Vikramādtiya or even for kings to adopt it as a title or *cognomen*.[53] By the turn of the first millennium, kings of both the Deccan and Mālwā (the traditional home of Vikramāditya) strongly associated themselves with Vikramāditya. In the eleventh century, both the Cālukyas of Kalyāṇi and the Paramāras of Mālwā commissioned literary works which cast men of their families as heirs to the legacy of the great Vikramāditya. At the Paramāra court, one Parimala Padmagupta, court poet of the kings Vākpati (r. 974–994) and his younger brother Sindhurāja (r. 995–1010), composed a *kāvya* celebrating the deeds of the latter, whom he styled 'Navasāhasāṅka', after one of Vikramāditya's epithets, Sāhasāṅka, or "he whose mark is boldness", because, he claimed, Sindhurāja "had performed a hundred acts of boldness in the world and is thus sung in the assemblies of heroes as the new Sāhasāṅka".[54] In describing his elder brother, Vākpati, Padmagupta

[50]The earliest external reference to Bhoja's notoriety as a patron of scholars occurs in the Banghar *praśasti*, issued in eastern India during the reign of the Pāla king Nayapāla (1027-43), in which a Śaiva ascetic by the name of Rūpaśiva is said to have been honoured by king Bhoja after his success in religious disputations. See D. C. Sircar 'Mūrtiśiva's Bangarh Praśasti' *Journal of Ancient Indian History* 13 (1980–84): pp. 34–56. The Kashmiri poet Bilhaṇa notes that he was unable to visit the court of Bhoja before the king's death, implying its notoriety. See *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, (ed.) G. Bühler (Bombay 1875) 28.96.

[51]See the review of this complex problem in D. C. Sircar, *Ancient Malwa and the Vikramāditya Tradition* (Delhi, 1969), pp. 106–168. The Vikramāditya stories may have been part of the original *Bṛhatkathā*. See G. V. Tagare, 'The Vikramāditya Tradition in Prakrit' in R. K. Mookerji, (ed.), *The Vikrama Volume* (Ujjain, 1948), pp. 587–596.

[52]See H. D. Velankar, 'Vikramāditya in Jain Tradition,' in R. K. Mookerji, (ed.), *The Vikrama Volume* (Ujjain 1948) pp. 637–670.

[53]See the remarks of Hemcandra Rayachaudhuri, 'Vikrmāditya in History and Legend,' in R. K. Mookerji, (ed.), *The Vikrama Volume*, pp. 491–492.

[54]*Navasāhasāṅkacarita*, (ed.) V. Islampurkar (Bombay, 1895) 11.102.

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waxes that "after the death of Vikramāditya and Sātavāhana, Sarasvatī took refuge in this friend of poets".[55]

As Padmagupta's conceits make clear, the chief features of the Vikramāditya image were his boldness and his peerless generosity to men of learning, but particularly poets. In the latter days of the Paramāra empire, king Bhoja, Sindhula's son, became the most remembered and revered of all Paramāra kings.[56] It is thus perhaps no surprise that in the story traditions emerging around Bhoja between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, he is compared most closely to the illustrious Vikramāditya. Indeed, the earliest legends of Bhoja's life, dated to the middle of the thirteenth century, seem from the outset to associate him in some way with Vikramādtiya, either explicitly, as the discoverer of Vikramāditya's throne as in the *Vikramacarita* tales, or through analogy, as in the Jain *prabandha* literature, which recount stories of Bhoja exhibiting the charactersitics of unfailing generosity and unstoppable boldness—Vikramāditya's distinctive qualities—but always falling somehow short in comparison.

An integral element in the narrative cycles of Bhoja, and to a lesser extent of Vikramāditya, was the idea of an assembly of eminent poets and scholars who attended the courts of these kings. In the case of Vikramāditya, the tradition may have been elaborated from a modest pre-existing notion, current in scholastic circles by the eleventh century, that the poet Kālidāsa had served as the emissary of King Vikramāditya to the Kuṇṭala country. Bhoja in his *Sṛṅgāraprakāśa* and Kṣemendra in his *Aucityavicāracarcā* suggest such a relationship to provide narrative context to specific verses they adduce as examples of different poetic features.[57] While traditional literary scholars have focused on these citations as fragments of evidence in the ongoing problem of the empirical Kālidāsa's date and *ouevre*, they ignore the significance of the citations themselves.[58] Bhoja and Kṣemendra's handling of these verses participate fully in the trend toward aurthorial ascription and contextualisation noted earlier in this essay. This elaboration was to grow, indeed, into a much more grand image of a plethora of poets and scholars residing at Vikramāditya's court, the most prominent of which were known as 'nine jewels' (*navaratnāni*).[59] Like the scholars of Bhoja's court in the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* and *Bhojaprabandha*, the names of these nine poets pose serious interpretive problems for modern scholarship and generated extensive debate in nationalist-era publications, presenting at once as a tantalising historicity and insurmountable historical anachronism.[60] D. C. Sircar judiciously pointed out, however, that not only did

[55]*Navasāhasāṅkacarita* 11.93.

[56]Bhoja did not enjoy this status during his own life-time. The Paramāra kingdom, after being conquered by the Cāḷukyas of Gujarat in *c.* 1142-43, and then ruled by their governors, was restored by king Vindhyavarman (r. 1175-94) and his sons. It is only in the geneaologies of these later Paramāra kings that Bhoja begins to take a more pivotal role in the family's history.

[57]See Bhoja's *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa*, (ed.) V. Raghavan (Cambridge, Mass, 1998) p. 423, and Kṣemendra's *Aucityavicāracarcā*, (ed.) Srinarayana Mishra (Varanasi, 1982), p. 99. It is notable that some of these same verses had been cited by Rājaśekhara a century earlier but without benefit of either authorial ascription or narrative context. See Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsa*, (ed.) C. D. Dalal, R. A. Sastry and enlarged by K. S. Ramaswami Sastri (Baroda, 1934) pp. 60–61.

[58]See the remarks of K. S. Ramaswami Sastri in his notes to the expanded edition of Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsa*, pp. 214–218 and V. Raghavan, *Bhoja's Sṛṅgāraprakāśa* (Madras, 1978), pp. 765–771. For a critique, see S. C. Banerji, *Kālidāsa Apocrypha*, pp. 25–29.

[59]On the earlier traditions associating Kālidāsa with Vikramāditya, see Sircar, *Ancient Malwa and the Vikramāditya Tradition*, p. 123.

[60]See the essays on the *navaratna* in Radha K. Mookerji, (ed.) *Vikrama Volume*.

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the list of names present problems of historical chronology, but the tradition of the *navaratna* itself was both late and obscure.[61] In fact, the image of Bhoja's court as a locus of Sanskrit poets would seem to be both prior to and more robust in its literary presence and reach than that of Vikramāditya, which may, given its late attestation, be based on it.[62]

The poets of Bhoja's court are first encountered in the Bhoja-Bhīma chapters of the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* and some of the shorter *prabandha*s anthologised in the *Purātanaprabandha-saṃgraha*. These stories introduce a number of more or less well- known poets into Bhoja's court—including Rājaśekhara, Māgha, Dhanapāla, Bāṇa, Mayūra, and Vararuci.[63] As the narrative unfolds, Bhoja either seeks these poets out or they attempt to come to his court themselves seeking his largesse. The dialogues between Bhoja and these characters typically take the form of various types of verse exchanges or verse completions. Merutuṅga mixes the political fortunes of Bhoja, his rivalry and admiration of king Bhīma of Gujarat, and vignettes about one or other poet visiting his court and receiving gifts from him. Bhoja is represented on the one hand as both connoisseur and patron/arbiter of poetry who spends his time rewarding men of learning, and on the other as a somewhat vainglorious king given to the excesses of pride. These two images of course rather explicitly parallel the qualities of Vikramāḍtiya. But whereas Merutuṅga's image of Vikramāditya depicts few if any poets at his court, Bhoja's court is visited by numerous eminent scholars. The depiction of Bhoja and the poets of his court in both the Jain works and the *Vikramacarita* have a kind of parable-like structure suited to the ostensibly didactic aims of this literature. Yet the stories of the poets of Bhoja's court seem have functions exceeding the demands of didactic narrative, as they clearly circulated independently and widely at the time of their assemblage.

With this context in mind, we may turn to the *Bhojaprabandha*, a late sixteenth-century narrative of king Bhoja's life assembled by Ballāla in Benares during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahangir.[64] Based on plot parallelisms and shared verses, it has been suggested that Ballāla drew heavily upon texts like the *Vikramacarita* and *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* of Merutuṅga, although it is difficult to be certain that there weren't other influences, since the full extent and history of Bhoja cycles between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries are not fully understood.[65] In the tradition of earlier royal *prabandha*s, the text is structured around the royal

[61]The first reference to the *navaratna* appears in an astronomy text, the *Jyotirvidābhāraṇa* that claims to be authored by Kālidāsa himself and dated at the commencement of the Vikrama Era at Vikramāditya's court. Some scholars have dated this text to the thirteenth century, though it is likely to be much later. The manuscript was copied in the seventeenth century. See Sircar, *Ancient Malwa and the Vikramāditya Tradition*, p. 120 and note; David Pingree, 'Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature', *A History of Indian Literature,* vol. VI, fasc. 4 (Wiesbaden, 1981), p. 103.

[62]Is it possible that the idea of the nine jewels of Vikramāditya's court was derived or inspired by the image of Bhoja's court.

[63]To these Merutuṅga adds several other, less well-known poets like Kulacandra.The *Purātanaprabandhasaṅgraha* includes references to the poet Chittapa, mentioned above, as Bhoja's emissary in the Bhoja-Gaṅgeya Prabandha.

[64]The text has received remarkably scholarly little attention considering its importance in Sanskrit scholastic culture. Beyond Luwig Oster's *Die Rezensionen des Bhojaprabandha* (Darmstadt, 1911) and Gray's *The Narrative of Bhoja*, I have been able to find only one scholarly article, Katarzyna Pazucha 'King Bhoja of Dhāra and his Court as Described in Ballāla's *Bhojaprabandha*,' in Danuta Stasik and Anna Trynkowska, (eds.), *The City and Forest in Indian Literature and Art* (Warsaw, 2010), pp. 69–77.

[65]On influences, see Gray, *Narrative of Bhoja*, pp. 4–5 and Pazucha, 'King Bhoja of Dhāra', p. 71. In addition to published works like fifteenth-century *Bhojacaritram* of the Jain monk Rājavallabha, there are in addition a substantial number of unpublished and probably lost texts with the title of *Bhojaprabandha* ascribed to other authors, including Merutuṅga, Vatsarāja, Śubhaśīlagaṇi, and Padmagupta. See Gray, *Narrative of Bhoja*, p. 8.

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career of Bhoja. It is divided into two parts: the first deals with Bhoja's birth and succession to the Paramāra throne; and the second, longer part, which is of more concern to us here, treats his court.

The second part of the *Bhojaprabandha* begins with Bhoja, having attained his kingdom, giving its management over to his minister so that he could enjoy his rule. There is no heroic action or dynastic intrigue in this part part of the text. It consists merely of episodes within the court of Bhoja. One day, Bhoja witnesses a Brahman of Dhārā passing by him in silence and deliberately closing his eyes. Perplexed, Bhoja asks him why he pointedly closed his eyes and did not greet him as he passed. The Brahman replies that knowing Bhoja to be a Vaiṣṇava, he had no fear of harm, but that since Bhoja gave nothing to anyone, greeting him was of no use, adding that he closed his eyes because of a saying (*lokokti*) that seeing a miser's face (*kṛpaṇamukha*) in the morning brought misfortune. The Brahman then cites several verses on the evils of kings under the influence of bad counsel and the benefits virtuous kings gain from supporting the learned. Bhoja, though taken aback, hails the Brahman for his edifying rebuke with two verses of his own. He gives the Brahman 100,000 gold coins and asks for his name. The Brahman traces the name 'Govinda,' on the ground. The king insists that he come to the royal court every day and then proclaims that other learned men and poets should be brought to the court for his amusement (*kautuka*) so that no learned persons should feel distress. Word spreads of the king's generosity and poets begin to arrive at his court from every direction.[66]

Eventually, some five hundred learned men are assembled at Bhoja's court, and the episodes of the text introduce even more—they include names like Bhavabhūti, Daṇḍin, Bāṇa, Mayūra, Vararuci, Māgha, and Kālidāsa, among others. The episodes record conversations between the poets and the king on a variety of subjects, each involving some display of poetic virtuosity. Verses are typically composed spontaneously, and are often composed and completed through dialogue, with the first *pāda*s of a verse being offered by one speaker as statement or riddle and the final *pāda*s completed as a rejoinder in the manner of what the tradition knows as *samasyāpūraṇa*. Bhoja rewards all those who show poetic skill. Some verses often take the subject of the praise of the king, the praise of poetry, or gifts of enormous wealth to poets, while others take up a theme like the uses of wealth. Elements of a story are nestled around the sequential utterance of a verse such that each hemistich is uttered in the form of a challenge or retort in an ongoing 'conversation' between two characters. Pre-eminence is placed on having the last word or on completing the verse with an unexpected turn that keeps perfect sense and meter with the previous parts, but introduces an unexpected element or conclusion. The most accomplished among the poets in finishing verses with astounding beauty and cleverness is Kālidāsa, with whom Bhoja develops a close friendship, resembling that of a boon-companion of Persianate literature.[67]

One of the distinctive features of the *Bhojaprabandha* is the large number of *subhāṣita* verses it contains. Ballāla puts over 300 verses into the mouths of the poets at Bhoja's court, each cleverly embedded in a narrative. As Louis Gray pointed out some time ago, the sources of

[66] *Bhojaprabandha*, (ed.) Shyam Sundarlal Tripathi, (Bombay, 1952) pp. 39–44.

[67] A comparative study of the narratives depicting the social roles of poet and patron, in light of the earlier traditions of the Sanskrit *viḍūṣaka* and Perso-Arabic *nadīm* would be a fruitful way forward in the study of the relationship of Sanskrit literary culture in an Indo-Persian world.

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these verses are the anthologies that we have discussed above—anthologies like Śridharadāsa's *Saduktikarṇāmṛta*, Jalhaṇa's *Sūktimuktāvalī*, Śārṅgadhara's *Śārṅgadharapaddhati*, and Vallabadeva's *Subhāṣitāvalī*—where they are most often attributed to different authors.[68] It would seem that they were borrowed without care for their original authorial assignments but instead for their thematic and contextual suitability for Ballāla's narratives. Ballāla's almost exclusive reliance on anthologies rather than the longer works ascribed to these well-known authors underscores the importance of verse-anthologies in literary circles by the middle of the second millennium. Indeed, it may be argued that the *Bhojaprabandha*, was its own kind of *subhāṣitasaṅgraha*. On the one hand the very large number of well-known and obscure verses embedded in the narrative exemplifies the close relationship between anthologies and the contexts in which single verses were deployed in oral-literary contexts of scholastic cuture. We can see a premium here placed on the singly recited verse and on the imbrication of verses into ethical, political and aesthetic discussions of everyday life among the learned. But what is more, the *Bhojaprabandha* seems to underscore a new 'author-function'. Ballāla gathers together and invents new anecdotes about particular poets, what are the 'scenes of authorship' that serve to dramatise what must have been contemporary debates in literary scholastic circles about which Sanskrit poets might be considered most eminent, indeed 'canonical.' The ultimate subject of the *Bhojaprabandha* is poetry, and it seems to have been a kind of meta-text—a scholiasts' delight, in which the prodigious literary accomplishments of the tradition's greatest poets could be narrativised into humorous and memorable stories and pithy verses.

Conclusion

It has been my contention that the proliferation of authorial ascription in the *subhāṣita* anthologies and scholastic literature from the twelfth century as well as the roughly contemporaneous appearance of anecdotes and stories around certain poets marked a shift toward a new literary imagination in South Asia. This vision involved the self-conscious peopling of a literary universe. These ascriptions and stories effectively reflect a new 'author-function,' in the tradition, one concerned about not only the corpus of poets, but the relative placement of the best of these poets in relation to one another.

The *Bhojaprabandha* presents us with an interesting literary historicity, for it seems to present a putative historical setting, operates through narrative technique, and has an evaluative function akin to many modern literary histories. Yet its patent anachronism proves it ultimately unassimilable to modern historical and literary sensibilities. Indeed, the narrative scaffolding of the *Bhojaprabandha* does not even conform to modes of narrating the political past in Sanskrit that were available to the author. The stories are episodic and anecdotal, and draw more from didactic story traditions than the kind of *res gestae* approach typical of *carita*s, *vaṃśa*s and eulogies. Bhoja's court as the fountain of poets was not located in the temporality of the political world—the world of the *vaṃśa* and *carita*. Bhoja as a great king surely existed in such time and space, and the authors of the Bhoja cycles fully understood this, as the narratives of his attainment of the throne make clear. Yet the court of Bhoja

[68]See Gray, *Narrative of Bhoja*, pp. 98–104.

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in the city of Dhārā, at the same time, was also a place removed from this type of historicity, set in an archaic and antique time beyond the rhythms of political history. More akin to Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* than Giorgio Vasari's *Le Vite*, the *Bhojaprabadha* presents the court of Bhoja as a heterotopic place where all the glorious poets of the Sanskrit literary tradition journeyed to sit together in eternal conversation. And Bhoja's court as a 'scene of authorship' was a literary device where learned men, through the ventriloquy of the anthologies, could delect and converse upon the relative virtues of the Sanskrit tradition's greatest poets.

Understanding the relationship of the changes I have outlined in this essay to the political world which formed the foundation of its patronage is a complex and thorny problem, and not the purpose of this essay. The obvious political change we might look toward is the fitful conquest of north India and establishment and consolidation of the Delhi Sultanate in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While Hindu imperial kingship and its imaginaire that had been at the center of the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' was surely fractured and circumscribed in these centuries by new political realities, these events also saw the gradual emergence of a new political language, new registers of cosmopolitanism, and the growth of vernacular literatures across north India. These changes, geographically and chronologically uneven, surely formed the context for a major re-articulation of Sanskrit belletristic writing with its traditional contexts of production—a re-articulation which is still not well clearly understood.

The recent theorists of Sanskrit *kāvya*'s demise in the second millennium have treated the proliferation of anthologies and narratives of poets in the second millennium as either reflecting or compensating for the trauma of a putative Hindu sovereignty. Jesse Knutson has argued that the prevalence of anthologies reflected the fractured and dispersed condition of the courtly ethos of Hindu kingship in North India, while Pollock has seen the *Bhojaprabandha* as looking back "nostalgically at Bhoja's reign as the perfection of courtly literary life" when the Sanskrit cosmopolis was at its "high water mark".[69] The approach here differs in that it has focused on these genres as new and productive developments that gave rise to a shift in the Sanskrit *kāvya* tradition's view of itself, a change which produced, arguably, its first emic and self-conscious accounts of literary *personae*. That these accounts do not form a history that is recognisable to us is precisely because they remove political time from their depiction of *kāvya*, not by banishment but, as it were, by apotheosis. While it may indeed be the case that the removal of Bhoja's court from historical time as it was once imagined was an ideation partly grounded in the impossibility of universal kingship in the realities of Ballāla's world, this was not a wistful lament for a world gone by, but rather a re-orientation of the tradition in which the poetic virtuosity of the tradition's poets could be continually re-enacted and constituted into something like a canon. The growth of literary anthologies and poetic biographies—and the scholastic culture of commentaries and treatises to which they were connected—allowed for lively discussions about the tradition which had previously been absent. Anthologies and stories about poets were closely linked in literary practice and served to provide both pretexts and materials for ongoing critical reflection and enjoyment.

[69]Knutson, 'Embedded Poets', p. 22; Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, p. 184.

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I will end with the final episode of the *Bhojaprabandha*. One day in the city of Dhārā, Ballāla tells us, king Bhoja asked Kālidāsa to recite a verse on his death. Kālidāsa became so annoyed that he left Dhārā immediately and went to live in the city of Ekaśīla. The king, distressed at the absence of his friend, embarked on an expedition dressed as a Śaiva ascetic in order to bring him back. One day he chanced upon Kālidāsa, and the latter, not recognising his disguise greeted him by asking where he was from. The ascetic responded by saying he was from city of Dhārā. The poet asked, "Is Bhoja well there?" to which the ascetic responded "Bhoja has gone to heaven". Hearing this, Kālidāsa fell to the earth weeping and exclaimed "Oh my lord, I cannot remain on the earth even for a moment without you, I will follow you" and then uttered a verse

Today Dhārā is without support and Sarasvatī too
has no stability. All the learned persons are
scattered since Bhojarāja has gone to heaven

Hearing the verse, the ascetic (Bhoja in disguise) fell stricken to the ground in grief. Kālidāsa immediately understood that he must be Bhoja, and scolded the king for deceiving him, reciting with ease a near identical verse.

Today Dhārā has stable support and Sarasvati safe asylum.
All learned men are ornamented since Bhojarāja is enjoying the earth.[70]

Unlike the Jain narratives which often tell of Bhoja's very mundane death, for Ballāla, Bhoja's death is but a ruse dispelled by the magic of poetry. It would seem on the face of it that king Bhoja cannot so easily be separated from his jewel encrusted court. After hearing Kalidāsa's rejoinder, Bhoja embraced his friend and poet, bowed to him, and returned to Dhārā, where he still resides, no doubt.

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[70] *Bhojaprabandha*, p. 223. The verses inquestion are nearly identical in Sanskrit, with Kalidāsa being able to change just a few syllables to alter the meaning completely, once again revealing his poetic virtuosity: *adya dhārā nirādhārā nirālambā sarasvatī / panditāḥ khaṇḍitāḥ sarve bhojarāje divam gate //* and *adya dhārā sadādhārā sadālambā sarasvatī / paṇḍitā maṇḍitāḥ sarve bhojarāje bhuvaṃ gate //*.

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